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# THE RAINBOW FEATHER



• BY • FERGUS • HUME •

AUTHOR OF

THE MYSTERY OF A HANSON CAB •

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# THE RAINBOW FEATHER

BY  
FERGUS HUME

*Author of "The Mystery of a Hansom Cab,"  
"Claude Duval of Ninety-Five," etc.*



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***The Rainbow Feather.***

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# THE RAINBOW FEATHER.

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## CHAPTER I.

### A TERRIBLE PROPHECY.

“THE lef’ han’, dearie, an’ gowld for th’ charm. Aye! a bewtiful han’ for a bewtiful maid. I ’udn’t rade false for—eh, dear life, what is’t? Th’ lines goo criss an’ crass. Duvel! I be mortal feared to tell ’ee. Take tha han’. Gran hes nought to spake for sich a mayden.”

As she said the last word, a startled look came into the glazed eyes of the old gipsy; and with a quick gesture she flung back the hand she had been holding. The pretty, fair-haired girl who was having her fortune told laughed nervously, and shot an anxious glance at the young man who stood near her. He was tall and dark and masterful; also he was in love with the girl, as could be seen from the tenderness in his eyes and the smile on his lips. But as the sibyl spoke,

as the girl started, he changed the smile to a frown, and caught the woman roughly by the arm. She was on the point of hobbling away; but, on feeling the man's grip, she turned doggedly to face him. With her rags and wrinkles, red cloak, and Oriental countenance, she looked like the Witch of Endor—at bay.

"Not so fast, gran!" said the young man, severely. "Miss Lester has given you a shilling, so you must earn it by telling her fortune—if you can," he added, in a scoffing tone, which savoured of scepticism.

"Ef I can!" repeated gran, looking contemptuously from under bushy gray eyebrows. "Eh, young gentl'man, that han' be asy raidin' tu I. But fur all this," she waved her stick round the gorse-besprinkled common upon which they were standing—"for all that"—she pointed towards the blue arch of the July sky—"I w'uldn't freeze th' blood o' this gude maid."

"How you do go on, Mother Jimboy!" giggled the girl, with an affectation of carelessness. "I don't believe a bit in hand-reading; I'm sure I don't, so there! I know my own fortune well. Don't I, Mr. Lovel?" and again she shot a glance at the young man—this time a coquettish one.

"Of course," he assented, with a smile; "and I know mine."

"An' I know both o' mum!" cried Mrs. Jimboy, striking her stick on the ground. "Heel heel 'tis gran as cud fright the smile from they pretty faces, I du say. Haw be young squire, Miss Milly?"

"Insolent!" muttered Lovel, wrathfully. "Hold your tongue, you old hag, and tell Miss Lester's fortune at once!

"I's feared for sure, dearies both; I's mortal feared."

"You silly old witch!" said Milly, with scornful bravery. "I'm not. I shall know what is in my hand; though I shan't believe a single word you say."

"'Tis as ye please, miss; believe or not, 'tis all one. But the skein will run till 'tis clipped for all that!"

"What do you mean by this jargon?" cried Lovel, still furious at the late illusion to the squire. "Speak plainly, or I'll hand you over to the police as an impostor!"

The last word touched the old dame nearly, and she reared up her bent frame to point a crooked finger at Lovel; but she spoke generally to the one and the other.

"Imposter, am I? Heel heel! An you don't believe, Miss Milly? Heel heel! I'll spare ye no more! Gimme th' han', dear soul alive, give th' han'; and if ye weep blood fur the tellings o' mum—well, I warned ye, I warned ye!"

Milly stamped a dainty foot, and held out a dainty hand to be seized by gran's brown claws.

"Do your worst!" said she petulantly. "I'm sure I shan't believe a single nasty thing you tell me!"

"Ay! eh!" mumbled Mrs. Jimboy, tracing the pink palm lines with a dirty forefinger; "but Fate, you zee, be stronger nor young things, dearie; aw, yis, fur sure. Here mum be, ef ye mus' now"—man and girl bent their comely heads, while gran continued—"you'm bound to one; you'm loved by another; but none o' mum shall call ye wife."

"Why not?" demanded Lovel roughly, while Milly drew back her hand with an ejaculation of alarm.

"Why?" cried the gipsy fiercely—"cause the grave 'ull be her bridal bed, for sure; an' worms 'ull feast on the beauty ye love. Death, dearie; death an' murder, I du tell 'ee; an' murder, dear souls, an' yis," she concluded, with a relish for her evil speaking.

Enraged by this speech, which made Milly cling to him in a tremor of nervous excitement, Lovel raised his cane threateningly. With an activity wonderful in one so old, gran shuffled nimbly back, spitting and snarling like a cat. Her eyes fairly sparkled with fury.

"Duvel!" she flashed out, using the Romany oath with a shaking of her stick; "the black curse on the pair o' ye! Death to her, an' sorrow to ye. One shall be taken, the other left. Ho, ho! how will ye look then, my delicate rye? you an' the squire, wi' death houlding your gude maid in his maw. I overlook mum, I du; an' so ye've the worth of your gowld from the impostor!"

After which fiery speech Mrs. Jimboy crawled away without as much as a glance behind her. Soon she dwindled to a scarlet spot on the distant greenness; and Milly, hitherto motionless, began to recover from her fears. Some red-tiled houses were visible on the edge of the common; through the golden glories of gorse blossom wound the high-road, broad and dusty; and over all arched the cloudless azure of the sky. Save the two young people, no human being was in sight; and they looked silently at one another, weighing and considering the ominous words of the gipsy—her early refusal to speak; her pointed use of the sinister word "murder"; and her fierce casting of words and money. These were the things which took the colour

from the cheeks of the couple, and made them eye each other with secret apprehensions.

"I'll go home now," said Milly abruptly, and she turned her face towards the square tower of a distant church.

Lovel walked quickly after her and laid a detaining hand on her arm. "Don't go yet," he entreated. "My dear Milly——"

"You have no right to call me so!" she interrupted sharply.

"Then give me the right."

"I can't; you know I can't. Why do you say such silly things?"

"Why?" burst out Lovel—"because I love you. Listen to me, Milly—now, it is no use your frowning—I shall call you by that name: I love you—I love you!"

"Oh!" said Miss Lester with great coolness, "then Miss Clyde——"

"I know what you are about to say," he said quickly—"that I love Miss Clyde. But you are wrong. It is true that I admired her, but when you came——" He flung out his hands and caught those of the girl's. "Milly," said he earnestly, "you have brought me to your feet for a jest; that jest must become—earnest. You must marry me."

"How you talk!" said Milly fretfully. "You know I can't marry you."

"Because of Mr. Herne—a man you don't care for?"

"Because of Mr. Herne—to whom I have been engaged for six months."

"But you don't care for him!" persisted Lovel.



"I care for him sufficiently to marry him," answered the girl evasively.

"What is the use of trying to deceive me, Milly? You marry Herne for his money and position."

"Well, and what if I do!" cried Miss Lester, flushing; "is it not my duty to do the best I can for myself and my people? What is father?—a poor country doctor with a miserable income. Our house should be called Poverty Villa, it is so wretched; and Iris worries me morn, noon, and night."

"But if your sister——"

"She is not my sister!" interrupted Milly wrathfully. "Iris Link is the daughter of my father's second wife; she is no kin of mine, and has no right to domineer over me like she does. I tell you I am thoroughly miserable at home!" cried Miss Lester with a stamp of her foot; "and I marry Darcy Herne to get away from Poverty Villa."

"Will you be any happier with Herne?"

"Why not? I shall have position and money and society."

"Pardon me," contradicted Lovel, "but you will have none of the three. Herne is as mad as a March hare, with his aspirations for a higher life, and his socialistic ideas that all are equal? Position! He gave that up long ago. Money! Well, he has money, but it will be spent in charity—not in pandering to your vanity. Society! Oh, yes! the society of the halt, the lame, the blind, and the religious! That's the set you'll move in. I tell you, Milly," cried Lovel vehemently, "that Herne does not love you; he loves no one and nothing but his mission, as he calls it. He

marries you simply to experiment on you—to lead you into the narrow path, no doubt.”

“I know all you tell me,” rejoined Milly, coolly, “but I’ll alter Darcy’s conduct when I am Mrs. Hernel!”

“I rather think he’ll alter yours, my dear. Now, if you marry me——”

“Yes!” interrupted Milly, disdainfully; “if I marry you, what then?”

“You would be happy,” finished Lovel, turning red.

Milly laughed and shrugged her shoulders. “Really, Mr. Lovel, you have a good opinion of yourself! I have known you eight months as a painter, but beyond that I am ignorant. Who are you?”

“A painter—an artist, as you say,” said the young man, sulkily.

“Are you rich?”

“No; I have two hundred a year.”

“As if we could marry on that!” scoffed Milly. “Are your parents alive?”

“No. I don’t know anything about my parents. I have been an orphan ever since I can remember.”

“Oh! So you have no money, no position, and—so far as I can see—no name; only your good looks, Mr. Lovel; and on these you wish to marry me. No, thank you, Mr. Egotist,” sneered Miss Lester, with a curtsy. “I prefer to marry the squire of Barnstead.”

Lovel was goaded into a retort. “You’ll never marry him,” he said, sharply, “if Gran Jimboy is to be believed.”

“How horrid of you to talk like that, just when I was trying to forget what that old wretch said! Lucas”—

she said the name with a glint of terror in her blue eyes—"do you believe in palmistry?"

"No," he responded, indifferently—no more than I believe in Fate."

"But Gran Jimboy said that I should be killed—murdered!"

Lovel looked at her, and laughed in an ugly manner. "As to that, my dear girl," he said with a sneer, "I hope it may be true. I would rather see you dead than the wife of Squire Herne!"

"You cruel wretch!" cried Milly, vehemently. "Why—why?"

"In the first place, because I love you; in the second, because Herne, the Apostle of the Higher Culture, is an unprincipled blackguard!"

"Darcy! Mr. Herne!"

"Yes. Oh, I have heard tales about him in London!"

"What kind of tales?"

"Tales of profligacy. He uses his name here to cloak his London wickednesses."

"I don't believe it," cried Miss Lester after a pause. "He is too good a man to be wicked. I don't love him, but I respect him. And if he is as wicked as you say," added Milly, with an afterthought, "he wouldn't be the friend of Mr. Chaskin."

"The Rev. Francis Chaskin," sneered Lovel, "who was an officer of the army before he became a vicar in the Church. Oh, I know all about him!"

"Is he bad also?"

"Herne and he are a pair of—mysteries."

"I think you are a third one," said Milly, in a puzzled tone. "Explain!"

"No—not here; there is no time, and I have no proofs. Meet me to-morrow night in the Winding Lane at half-past eight, and I'll give you the prenuptial character of your future husband."

"To-morrow will be Sunday."

"What of that? You can meet me after evening service."

"Oh!" Milly looked terrified. "What would Darcy say if he knew that I met you at so late an hour?"

"H'm! What would Darcy say if he knew that all his iniquities were about to be laid bare? Come or not, as you like."

Miss Lester considered. "Darcy is in London, and won't be back for four days," she said at length. "I'll come—if you promise to tell no one."

"I promise. At half-past eight, in the Winding Lane."

"Yes; but I won't believe what you tell me."

"You said the same thing about Gran Jimboy's prophecy!" said Lovel, drily; "but you believe it for all that."

"I don't—I don't! Do you?"

When Milly put this question, Lovel looked at her gravely.

"I'll answer that question to-morrow night," said he; and then they parted.

## CHAPTER II.

### POVERTY VILLA.

BARNSTEAD was a moderately large village, which had not increased in population or size since the Middle Ages. In fact, it was less important now than it had been in medieval times, for then several battles, detrimental to a kingly dynasty, had been fought in its vicinity. Now it was a quiet, somnolent spot, which had nothing to do with the affairs of the nation; at all events, these were not transacted within its neighbourhood. Ten miles distant, the roaring manufacturing town of Marborough responded to the business spirit of the century, and was connected by rail with the metropolis, but the iron way came no further; and to reach Barnstead it was necessary to drive or ride. For the convenience of chance visitors a coach ran daily between the Herne Arms in Barnstead and the William Pitt Hotel in Marborough. This was the sole link which connected the village with the outside world.

The surrounding country was flat and alluvial and agricultural, with prosperous farms set here and there in the extent of its plain. In the centre of these rich

corn'ands, which formed the wealth of the region, Barnstead was placed beside a sluggish little stream, too small to be called a river. The quaint houses of the village clustered round a beautiful minster of ornate architecture. This was St. Dunstan's Church, and dated from Saxon times, although its design was Norman, and the greater part of it had been built in the thirteenth century. The Rev. Francis Chaskin, ex-cavalry officer, was its vicar, and the living had been presented to him by Darcy Herne, squire and lord of Barnstead Manor, and the firm friend of this soldier turned priest.

Herne Grange, the great house of the district, was situated a quarter of a mile from Barnstead, and nestled amid the trees of its park, some little way back from the high road leading to Marborough. Its present owner, a man of thirty, was devoured by religious fanaticism, and was subject to trances like those recorded of the Catholic saints. He was tall, meagre, pale, and—so far as could be seen—quite detached from worldly pleasures; so why such a saint should have engaged himself to frivolous Millicent Lester was a problem which no one could solve. Yet eight months before the beginning of this tale the ascetic and the coquette—to describe them by their most pronounced characteristics—became engaged, and the wedding was to take place shortly.

Whatever Herne's reason might have been for the match, his bride-elect made no secret that her consent was based on solely monetary grounds. Her father was poor, her home—owing to the domineering of the inconvenient Iris Link—was disagreeable; and to

escape from these ills she was content to become Mrs. Herne, of the Grange. Secretly she would have preferred Lucas Lovel as a husband, as he was good-looking and pleasant, but in the face of his avowed poverty she chose to marry Darcy Herne. Nevertheless, she recompensed herself for this dutiful compliance with necessity by flirting with Lovel whenever she could do so without such behavior coming to the ears of her future husband. With Darcy's strict views, he was quite capable of breaking off the match did he learn of her conduct; and Milly was too anxious to complete this rich marriage to run such a risk. So she coquetted discreetly with Lovel, and assumed a demure demeanor when in the saintly presence of Herne.

Who Lovel was no one knew. He had come from London with an introduction to Herne some eight months previously; and since that time he had remained in the village sketching and fishing, and amusing himself at Barnstead tea-tables. After remaining a month at the Grange he had taken rooms at the Herne Arms, and was quite accepted as a friend and equal by the gentry in and about the village. He was dark, and, as has before been stated, very handsome; also, he had apparently travelled a good deal, and spoke several foreign languages excellently well. His dress and manner were both irreproachable; and he was voted quite an acquisition to Barnstead society. Nevertheless, he had his detractors, and it was hinted by these that the man was an adventurer, in search of a rich wife. But Lovel's friends always pointed out

that this could not be so, else he would have married Miss Clyde.

Selina Clyde was a masculine young woman who farmed her own lands and looked after her own monetary affairs. She was tall, raw-boned, and fair, with a contempt for feminine fripperies, which led her to dress in a somewhat mannish way. Wet or dry, she was out riding or walking over her lands, and knew all about draining, top-dressing, manuring, and such like agricultural matters; also, she was a shrewd business woman, and boasted with good reason that no one had ever got the better of her in a bargain. In her farmhouse, a comfortable old homestead some two miles on the other side of Barnstead, she dwelt with Mrs. Drass, her former governess, who was said to be the greatest gossip in the neighborhood. Until the appearance of handsome Lucas Lovel, Miss Clyde had made up her mind to live and die a spinster; but, with his advent, she had yielded to the influence and charm of his manner to such a degree that without inquiring into his antecedents she was quite prepared to marry him. Lovel saw this, and in other circumstances might have seized the chance of a comfortable future; but being in love with Milly, he wanted to make her Mrs. Lovel, and endow her with his poverty. Miss Clyde saw this, felt herself scorned for the frivolous beauty of the doctor's daughter, and soon came to hate Milly with all her heart. And Miss Clyde, as everyone knew, was an admirable hater.

For the last few days Herne had been in London on some business connected with religious missions; and during his absence Milly had contrived to meet Lovel



once or twice in what was presumably a casual manner. She was now coming home from the meeting at which Gran Jimboy had prophesied misfortune; and was rather alarmed when she recalled her promise to meet Lucas the next evening at half-past eight. She felt that to keep such an appointment would be indiscreet.

"But I shan't go! I shan't go!" she kept saying to herself on the way home to Poverty Villa. All the same, such was her curiosity to know if there was any truth in Lovel's statements regarding the profligacy of her future husband, she knew very well she would keep the appointment. "I owe it to myself to learn the truth about Darcy before it is too late," she said several times in order to quiet her conscience; and in this frame of mind she arrived at the house of her father.

Poverty Villa, as Milly nicknamed the place, was a scrubby little house with two acres of neglected ground, and was located in the poorest part of the village. Dr. Lester should have had a flourishing practice, but had not, for two causes; the first being that the other medical man had been established for a longer time in Barnstead; the second and more serious reason being that he was an habitual drunkard. All day long he was sip, sip, sipping at brandy; and although never aggressively intoxicated, his brain was always in a confused state, which rendered people distrustful of his judgment in diagnosing cases and prescribing drugs.

"It's a wonder he hasn't killed the few patients he has long ago," said Mrs. Drass, who made no secret

of her dislike for the doctor; "but some day he'll give someone the wrong medicine and poison him; then he'll be hanged, and that will be a judgment on him for letting his minx of a daughter flirt with young Lovel," the truth of which speech being that Mrs. Drass, who was something of a toady, wanted Milly to release Lovel from her fascinations, that he might marry Selina Clyde.

But other people shared this opinion, and it was only of a few patients that Dr. Lester could boast, these being mostly amongst the poorer classes of agricultural labourers. Consequently the fees were small, and but that Lester had a few hundreds of his own, it might have gone hard with himself and his daughters. As it was the Lester household was hard up for all but the barest necessities of life. Iris Link, who managed the domestic affairs, did her best to make both ends meet, and to present a fairly decent outside to the world; but all to no purpose. The world of Barnstead knew the truth about Poverty Villa, and openly pitied the trio who lived in it. But it was admitted on all hands that Dr. Lester spent on drink what he should have devoted to the nourishment and clothing of his daughters—or rather, his daughter and stepdaughter.

Milly entered the house in the full expectation of having trouble with Iris, and in this she was not disappointed. Iris met her as she closed the door, and beckoned her into the shabby little drawing-room, where for a moment or so the two girls eyed one another in silence. As Milly had told Lovel, there was no kin between them, for Iris was the daughter of the

second Mrs. Lester by her first husband; and when that lady had married the doctor she found him already provided with a child by his first wife. Milly was twenty years of age, Iris twenty-five; and while the first was a beautiful girl with many admirers, the second was dark and quiet, with no grace of form or face, and, as yet, had not gained one lover. Her small accomplishments were quite extinguished by the brilliance and beauty of Milly. Yet Iris possessed the better nature of the two, and would make a better wife, in spite of her looks. The dispositions of the two girls were antagonistic; and they disliked one another exceedingly. Only the narrowness of their circumstances compelled them to live under the same roof, else they would have parted long since. Luckily—as both thought—the marriage of Milly would bring about the wished-for separation; yet even in this there was an element of bitterness to Iris. What that element was may be seen from the slightly acidulated conversation which ensued.

“Really, Milly!” said Iris with a weary sigh. “I do think you might stay at home and help me with the house. There is such a lot to do, and Eliza”—the one servant of the Lesters—“is worse than useless.”

“Then get another servant!” retorted Milly, throwing down her hat. “I am not going to stay in on this fine day.”

“What would Darcy say if he knew you were wandering about by yourself?”

“Bother! Who cares what he says! Besides,” added Milly, defiantly, “I have not been by myself.”

"Milly," cried Iris, with a dark shade on her face, "have you been again with Mr. Lovel?"

"For the last hour, my dear."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Milly laughed, and examined herself critically in the mirror over the fireplace. She was used to the scoldings of Iris, and cared very little for them. So long as Darcy did not hear of her flirtations with Lovel she had no fear, and treated the expostulations of Iris and the doctor with cool disdain. She did not trouble herself to reply to the last remark, but continued to admire her beauty with critical eyes, while Iris continued:

"You know Mr. Lovel is almost engaged——"

"To Miss Clyde, I suppose you mean. Oh, dear! no, he isn't! He has just told me that he cares nothing for her and a good deal for me."

"But you are engaged to Mr. Herne."

"I am, my dear; I am!" retorted Milly swinging round on the tips of her toes. "Don't you wish you were?"

Iris flushed crimson, for Milly knew well enough that she more than admired the squire. "If I were," she said, evading the question, "I should act in a more honourable way towards him."

"Pooh! pooh! A few words with Mr. Lovel won't hurt him."

"A few words, as you call them, will hurt both men. You can't marry Mr. Lovel."

"I don't want to; nor can you marry Darcy. Look here, my love," continued Milly coolly: "please don't lecture me any more. If you think Darcy ought to

know, tell him about Mr. Lovel, then he'll break off the match with me, and perhaps you'll catch him."

"I would not think of doing such a thing!" cried Iris vehemently.

"Why not? I'd do it in your place. You are too good, my dear; too, too good!"

"I'll speak to father," said Iris, who from habit called the doctor so.

"What good will that do? In the first place, he'll probably not be sober; and, in the second, he's too anxious for me to marry Darcy to tell on me. Oh, dear! I wish you were to marry Darcy, Iris; he is just the prig for you!"

Iris looked at the fire with a frown, and not caring to trust herself to speech, ran out of the room and into the garden. There was something so shameless about Milly's speeches and actions with regard to Lovel that she was almost tempted to tell Herne and prevent the match. But then she loved Herne, and her intervention would be put down to jealousy.

"I can do nothing, nothing," she thought; "if Mr. Lovel——"

At this moment the man himself passed slowly down the road in close conversation with Gran Jimboy. His face was quite pale, and he looked as though he had received a shock—as indeed he had. Mrs. Jimboy had revealed something connected with the meeting of the next night!

## CHAPTER III.

### THE SERMON.

By the time Lovel and his oddly-chosen companion had passed out of sight, Iris regained her composure and returned to the house. She said nothing to Milly, who was now playing waltzes on the jingling piano, and did not even re-enter the drawing room. It was quite useless to expostulate further with the spoiled beauty; so Iris went back to help Eliza in the kitchen, and to see after the dinner. Nevertheless, she thought a great deal about Milly's flirtation with Lovel; and, since she could do nothing with the girl, wondered if it would be wise to inform Dr. Lester of the situation.

It must be clearly understood that Iris did not wish Milly to marry the Squire of Barnstead. She was in love with him herself, and would have dearly liked to become his wife. The mysticism of the man attracted her in no small degree, and she sympathised with his aspirations and religious views. It was clear to the most unobservant that Milly would not make him a good wife; and nothing would have pleased Iris better than that something should occur to interrupt the marriage. But she was resolved that the obstacle should not be placed in the way by her, lest it should

be said that she was scheming to obtain Herne for herself. Rather than she should be accused of such selfishness, Iris was determined to bring about the marriage by every means in her power. The one danger likely to prevent the match was the flirtation of Milly with Lovel; and Iris decided to tell Dr. Lester of this danger, so that Milly should meet her lover no more. The father alone could save his daughter from jeopardising her future.

Unfortunately, Dr. Lester returned from Marborough more or less intoxicated, and after a pretence of eating retired to his bedroom to sleep off his potations. It was quite useless to appeal to Philip drunk, as Iris knew well; therefore she was obliged to wait till next morning, when there might be some chance of getting Philip sober to take a sensible view of the matter. Milly took no notice of her father's condition, being well used to his debauches, but spent the evening in trimming a hat which she designed to wear to church the next day. Iris sat in the same room, employed with needlework; and took the opportunity of informing Milly what she intended to do. There was nothing secretive about Miss Link; she was an open enemy, and not a snake in the grass; moreover, she hoped by warning Milly of her decision to make her promise to renounce the Lovel flirtation.

"Milly," she said, as they worked rapidly, "have you thought of what I said to you this afternoon?"

"About what?" asked the other carelessly.

"About Mr. Lovel. Will you promise to stop flirting with him?"

"No, I won't!" said Milly flatly; "he amuses me, and

I intend to meet him and talk to him as much as I like. If you choose you can tell Darcy."

"You know I shan't do that," replied Iris quietly, "and that you are safe in giving me the permission. But I'll tell your father."

"Pooh! What does that matter? He won't speak to Darcy: he's too anxious for me to marry the man; I told you that this afternoon."

"He will be very angry," cried Iris in despair.

"Let him be angry!" returned the dutiful daughter; "he can't kill me!"

"O Milly! Milly! Why can't you behave in a more honourable manner? If you love Mr. Lovel, break off the match with Mr. Herne."

"And let you have your chance!" sneered Milly, tossing her head. "No, thank you, dear."

"Then stop flirting with Mr. Lovel and be true to your future husband."

Milly laughed, shook her head, and busied herself with threading a needle. "My future husband," said she slowly; "h'm! perhaps I won't marry him after all."

"Then you intend to accept Mr. Lovel?"

"No, I intend to do nothing. But Gran Jimboy read my hand this afternoon, and she prophesied that I should marry neither."

"What do you mean?" asked Iris sharply. "Have you a third admirer?"

"According to gran I have," said Milly with a shiver; "the third admirer is Death, my dear. I am to be—murdered!"

Iris rose so quickly that her work rolled on to the



floor. She looked at Milly in a scared sort of way. "Are you out of your mind?" she said nervously.

"No; I'm only telling you what Gran Jimboy read in my hand. But I don't believe in palmistry; do you, Iris?"

"No, I don't," said Miss Link contemptuously. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, letting Gran Jimboy play on your fears. Did she say you would die?"

"Yes; that I should be murdered. Ugh!" and Milly shivered again.

"You don't believe such rubbish?"

Miss Lester jumped up and threw the hat she had been trimming on the sofa. "I don't know," she said, pacing to and fro. "Sometimes I do; sometimes I don't. I wish you would not talk of death! I hate it!" Then, after a pause, "I'm going to bed," said she.

Iris arrested her at the door. "Milly, do be sensible, and give up these wild ideas."

"Mr. Lovel, I suppose?"

"Yes; don't flirt with him any more, and I'll not tell Dr. Lester."

"You can do as you please!" returned Milly loftily. "I'm doing no harm, and I'll talk to Lucas as much as I please!"

"Lucas! You call him by his first name?"

"When I wish to be nice, I do," replied the girl provokingly; "and he calls me by mine."

"Milly, you are ruining your life!" said Iris in despair.

"Ah, well; what of it? It's going to be a short one—according to Gran Jimboy," and before her sister

could make a further remark Milly ran out of the room, with a nervous laugh. Iris resumed her seat, and again devoted herself to work, but her thoughts were busy with the ill-disciplined mind of her companion.

Whether it was Milly's attitude towards Herne, or her conduct with Lovel, or her revelation of the gipsy's prophecy, Iris did not know; but she felt a premonition of evil, and wondered what she could do to prevent the occurrence of ill. There was no thought of self in the desire, for she was genuinely sorry for the fool's paradise in which Lovel was living. Doubtless he thought that Milly would break with Herne to marry him; but Iris was assured that her sister was too fond of money and luxury to do so. Milly had no idea of morality, or right or wrong, and was quite content to flirt with one man and go to the altar with the other, without caring for the consequences. Yet in the complication she had made there lay the elements of tragedy; and Iris wondered if the gipsy had been clever enough to guess this, and had prophesied death and danger merely on the possibility of such result. She was beginning to feel alarmed at the entanglement, and resolved to put matters straight if she could. Failing the authority of Lester over his reckless daughter, which was merely nominal, it yet remained that an explanation and an appeal to Lovel might induce him to withdraw from the fascinations of Milly, and leave the village. Then the marriage with Herne might be pressed on, and under his good influence and care Milly might be sheltered from the dangers of life which were created by her love of admira-

tion. This was the only course to pursue, and Iris decided to take it.

"I'll see Mr. Lovel to-morrow," she said when retiring to bed, "and appeal to his better nature to go away. Darcy is so much in love with her that it would break his heart to lose her. Milly must marry him, and do her best to make him happy. I can do nothing less to show my love for him. Ah! he does not guess how I worship him! If he did—alas! alas!" Here Iris broke off her meditations, and extinguished the light. Then, in the silence and darkness, she wept quietly over her unreturned love and aching heart. Truly, to a woman, the burden of unrequited affection is heavy to bear.

Early on Sunday morning Milly received a letter from Darcy, stating that he would return the next day, as he had concluded his business. The information gave her no pleasure, as it meant that she would have to submit to be bored in his company, and would not be able to see Lucas as often as heretofore. Yet the receipt of the letter gave her the assurance that she could safely keep her appointment with Lovel, without being found out; and her hitherto wavering decision was fixed from that moment. This intention was unknown to Iris else she might have prevented the meeting.

Milly did not go to church in the morning, but Iris attended at St. Dunstan's, less for the service than because she desired to see Lovel. Dr. Lester had been as cross as a bear—the usual result of his weekly visit to Marborough—and Iris had not dared to complain about Milly, lest it should raise a domestic storm. The

doctor kept to his own room, Milly amused herself with a novel, and Iris went to church to see Lovel. He was not present, however, and as she could not call on him at the Herne Arms, she was obliged to return home disappointed; and decided to delay her appeal till the next day. The delay was fatal.

As usual, Milly idled through the long summer hours in a discontented fashion, keeping out of her father's way as much as possible. She saw from his conduct that Iris had not fulfilled her threat of informing him of her vagaries, and said as much.

"No," replied Iris coldly; 'I have not complained to your father, as he has no authority over you. It would be useless."

"I'm glad you see that, dear," rejoined Milly cordially. "I suppose you intend to speak to Darcy and get me a lecture?"

"I have told you twice that I do not intend to speak to Mr. Herne. No; it is my intention to ask Mr. Lovel to leave the village."

"Pooh! He won't do that while I'm here.

"If he is an honorable man he will."

Milly shrugged her shoulders. "All I know is that he is a very nice fellow," she said; "if you want honor and priggishness, go to Darcy."

Iris was too disgusted to reply to this remark, and went to her room in silence to prepare for evening service. Fearing lest Lovel should speak with Milly on the way to church, she insisted that the girl should come with her. Assured that the appointment would be kept in the Winding Lane, Milly agreed to this readily enough, as she did not wish to rouse the suspicion of Iris, whom she regarded in the light of a

marplot. So, to church the sisters—as they may be called—went in the most amiable fashion, and presented an affectionate exterior for the benefit of the Barnstead gossips.

St. Dunstan's was quite full, for Mr. Chaskin was the preacher, and his sermons were always worth hearing. He was a tall, well-built man, with an earnest, clean-shaven face; and as he walked in at the tail of the choir-boys a suspicion of his former military vocation could be seen in the swing of his stride. With certain alterations consequent on the Reformation, he had exchanged the sword for the cowl, like some warrior of mediaeval times. He was as earnest a clergyman as he had been a soldier; and had won golden opinions from one and all since his arrival at Barnstead.

During the earlier part of the service Milly, according to custom, looked round the church, and prayed with the lips rather than the heart. In the almost conventual gloom—for the summer twilight filtered but dimly through the stained-glass of the windows—she noted her friends and acquaintances, and particularly her lover. He was seated in a distant aisle near a pillar, but could see her plainly enough, and several times during the service they exchanged glances. Miss Clyde was there, in the company of Mrs. Drass, but being near the front of the building, they could not see Lucas. Had they been placed so as to observe him, Milly would have been more discreet in her glances; but, feeling safe from observation, she indulged in as many as she pleased. If Iris noted her looks, she made no sign; for she looked at her prayer-book constantly,

Shortly Milly's glances alighted on a strange lady, who was staring at her steadily. She was a brilliant-looking brunette, not very tall (as Milly could see when she stood up), and dressed in the height of fashion. Miss Lester wondered who she could be, and why she stared at her so hard. After a time she returned the gaze, and the eyes of the two met. At once the strange lady removed her eyes, and glanced at Lucas; then looked back to Milly in the most meaningful manner. Indignant and bewildered by this pantomime, Milly grew crimson, and tried to keep her attention on the music; but whenever she looked up the lady was glancing in the same way from her to Lucas and back again. Lovel himself did not see the stranger—at all events, Milly did not think so; but Mrs. Drass had her eyes on the brunette, and was doubtless alive with curiosity.

When Mr. Chaskin gave out the text, Milly forgot the strange lady; she forgot Lucas, and Darcy, and everyone else. The only person she remembered was Gran Jimboy, for the text was "One shall be taken, the other left," which was the exact expression used by the gipsy at the time of the hand-reading on the previous day. Milly's face grew pallid with nervous fear, her heart beat rapidly, and she felt that the atmosphere was too close to breathe. There seemed to be something ominous in the coincidence of the gipsy's speech and the text; and she felt that something was wrong; also, the looks of the strange lady embarrassed her. So, on the impulse of the moment, she rose from her seat and left the church with all speed.

## CHAPTER IV.

### WHAT HAPPENED ON SUNDAY NIGHT.

AT first Iris intended to follow Milly, thinking that she suffered from some slight indisposition; but recollecting that up to the moment of leaving the girl had seemed perfectly well, she concluded that it was merely to escape the sermon Milly had left so hurriedly. For this reason she kept her seat, until it struck her that the exit might be designed in order to meet Lovel. However, a glance assured her that the young man was still in his seat, and showed no intention of following her sister. The strange lady remained, but of course Iris had not observed her as Milly had done. Mrs. Drass, in a pew a little way off, gave a sniff of significance, and glanced at Miss Clyde, but that lady, seeing that Lucas was listening attentively to the sermon (she had caught a glimpse of him, and had turned round to look), paid no attention to the hint. All this passed unperceived by the rest of the congregation.

Mr. Chaskin invariably limited his discourse to fifteen minutes; and on this occasion he was even shorter and more pithy than usual. The service was concluded by eight o'clock, and Lucas was one of the first to leave the church. At once he was followed by the

strange lady, whom he had not observed, and when Iris emerged from the porch she found that both had disappeared. Neither was Milly in sight, so, concluding that she had gone home, Iris prepared to follow. Shortly, however, she was accosted by Mrs. Drass, who had left Miss Clyde in order to discover the reason of Milly's exit. To the suspicious mind of the ex-governess, everything done by the doctor's daughter was a covert act of insolence against her former pupil. To such an extent can prejudice distort a naturally liberal nature.

"Good evening, Miss Link," said Mrs. Drass, puffing and blowing—for she was very stout, and had made considerable haste to overtake Iris. "I am so glad to see you. I want to walk home with you and see your dear pa. He is in, I dare say?"

"He was when I left, Mrs. Drass," replied Iris, who quite understood what the good lady was aiming at. "Do you not feel well?"

"Not very, my dear. The heart, you know, and shortness of breath. I thought I would just see Dr. Lester before I drove home with Selina."

"Where is she?" asked Iris, glancing round at the dispersing congregation.

"Speaking with Mr. Chaskin. She will call for me at your house in half an hour, so I shall have time to see your pa. By the way, my dear," said Mrs. Drass, as they walked slowly onward side by side, "I hope your sister is not ill?"

"She did not mention that she was ailing," replied Iris, dryly.

"Then why did she leave before the sermon?"



"I do not know, Mrs. Drass. No doubt we shall find her indoors, and then you can ask her yourself."

"Oh, my dear!" Mrs. Drass exclaimed in a shocked tone, as though virtuously indignant at the idea of gossiping. "I would not think of troubling about such a trifle. I simply thought your dear sister was ill, seeing she left before Mr. Chaskin's sweet discourse; and I had half a mind to follow with my smelling bottle."

"Very kind of you," said Iris, briefly; and then, as she disliked the conversation, held her tongue. Mrs. Drass at once began on a fresh topic.

"Did you see that stranger in church?" she asked—"a handsome young lady, most beautifully dressed. I wonder who she can be?"

"I did not observe her particularly."

"She looked at Mr. Lovel a great deal," continued Mrs. Drass artfully, "and at your sister. I was ill-placed for observation, but I turned and saw their looks."

"I don't understand you," said Iris, on her guard at this coupling of Milly's name with that of Lovel.

Mrs. Drass became tart at once. "Oh, my love, it is not very difficult to understand," she said stiffly; "in my opinion, your sister exchanged so many glances with Mr. Lovel that the strange lady thought——"

"I don't want to know what she thought, Mrs. Drass. You forget that my sister is engaged."

"I think it is Milly Lester who forgets that!" cried Mrs. Drass venomously; "it is really disgraceful the way in which she flirts with Mr. Lovel!"

"Mrs. Drass!"

"Now, don't be cross with me, my dear," wheezed

the fat old lady, as they stopped at the gate of Poverty Villa. "I only repeat what all the village talks about. I don't know what Mr. Herne will say to your sister's conduct! Such a good young man as he is!"

"Here is Dr. Lester," said Iris, cutting short these remarks; and leaving Mrs. Drass in the company of her stepfather, she retired hastily in search of Milly. To her surprise, the girl was not in the house. Iris searched everywhere, and, alarmed by this unexpected absence, went downstairs with the intention of leaving the house to look for her. Passing by Dr. Lester's room, the door of which was ajar, she heard the oily voice of Mrs. Drass accusing Milly of flirting with Lovel. Although she hated eavesdropping, Iris listened in the interests of her sister.

"Indeed, my dear doctor, I should advise you to interfere," Mrs. Drass was saying; "you know how particular Mr. Herne is. If he learnt too much about Milly——"

"He shall learn nothing," broke in Dr. Lester's harsh voice, "unless you tell him."

"Excuse me, I never speak of my neighbours' business. This has nothing to do with me."

"But it has a great deal to do with Miss Clyde."

"I don't understand——" began Mrs. Drass, when the doctor cut her short with a short and rude laugh.

"Oh, you understand well enough!" he said, contemptuously. "I hear gossip as well as you do. Miss Clyde wants to marry Lovel, and cannot do so till Milly is out of the way. In the interest of your friend, you wish Milly to marry Herne, and so will not tell him of this—flirtation."

"There is some truth in that," admitted Mrs. Drass, "although you put it rudely."

"I put it plainly, you mean," said Lester. "You can go away content, madam, for I shall speak to Milly."

"Poor motherless girl! She needs talking to," sighed Mrs. Drass, and prepared to take her leave, satisfied in every way with the success of her mission.

Before searching for Milly, who was yet absent, Iris determined to speak to her stepfather. The ice had been broken, and it was now easier to induce him to interfere. When Mrs. Drass took her departure, which she did almost immediately, Iris entered the doctor's consulting room at once. Lester already had got out the brandy bottle and was filling himself a glass. He looked red-eyed and wrathful, and turned viciously on Iris before she had time to open her mouth.

"What is this I hear about Milly and Mr. Lovel?" he snarled. "Is her name to be on the lips of every village gossip? Can't you look after her?"

"No, I can't. She laughs at me."

"Where is she? I'll take care she doesn't laugh at me!" cried Lester. "Send her in here at once."

"How can I? She is not yet in."

Lester looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes past eight o'clock!" he growled; "and you let her gad about at this hour! No doubt she is with Lovel now!"

"I should not be at all surprised," said Iris, coldly.

"Good Lord! how coolly you speak!" raged the doctor, setting down his empty glass and filling it again. "Don't you know that if Herne hears of these things he'll break off the marriage!"

"I shouldn't blame him if he did."

"Rubbish! I tell you, if Milly loses Herne, everything will smash up. We can't hold out much longer. Herne has promised to pay all we owe and to lend me money. It all depends on Milly; yet you let her flirt with Lovel, and run the risk of ruining all. If Chaskin heard about this Lovel affair, he would tell Herne, and then—curse it!"—the doctor broke off hastily, and drank another glass of brandy—"I must do something!"

"You won't do much if you go on taking that!" said Iris pointedly.

"What is that to you, miss? Mind your own business! I shall drink as much as I please." He filled himself a third glass of brandy. "As for Lovel, if I catch him I'll trash the life out of him! Spoiling Milly's chance of a rich husband—I'll kill him before he does that. I shall lock her up, and you also, you—you——"

Not waiting to hear what he called her, Iris withdrew, sick at heart. She knew well enough that this was the commencement of a drinking bout, which would last three or four days. Did Lester meet his daughter in the company of Lovel while the drunken fit was on him, he was quite capable of proceeding to personal violence. Iris left the house hurriedly, with the intention of finding Milly, and bringing her home lest ill should befall. At that moment, with her miserable home, the burden of Milly's follies, and her own aching heart, the poor girl felt thoroughly ill and wretched.

On leaving Poverty Villa, she turned her steps

towards the main street of the village, and wondered where she would find Milly. It was yet light, a kind of luminous twilight, with a star-sprinkled heaven, and a gentle breeze sighing amid the trees. Few people were about, as it was now about nine o'clock, and the majority of Barnstead folk were within doors, lingering over their suppers. Iris paced slowly along, her head aching with nervous pain, and her heart full of anxiety. When she arrived in the square where St. Dunstan's Church was situated she paused in utter helplessness, for she knew not in which direction to look for the truant; nor for very shame could she ask any of the passers-by if they had seen the girl. For the moment she was completely at a loss what to do.

Unexpectedly the chimes began to ring, and the clock of St. Dunstan's struck nine with slow and ponderous strokes. As Iris counted them idly, she fancied she heard the sharp sound of a distant shot, and, for the moment wondered who could be shooting at that late hour. But the deep tone of the church bell striking the hour confused her, and hearing no more shots she thought that she must have been dreaming. After a pause she pursued her way, and turned homeward.

It struck Iris that Milly might have met Lovel by appointment, in which case the meeting, to elude observation, would undoubtedly take place on the outskirts of the village. Iris therefore made a detour, and walked homeward round by the common and through the sparse woods which fringed the town. But all to no purpose; not a sign of Milly or of anyone else could she see, and it was with a sigh that she re-

entered Barnstead streets on her way to the villa. As she passed the Herne Arms, she saw a carriage drive off, and as it whirled past her on the road to Marborough, she noted that it was occupied by a lady. However, as she did not recognize the face—which she saw indistinctly in the twilight—she took no further note of the incident. In a few moments she reached home, and was met at the door by Eliza in a great state of alarm.

"Oh, miss, I am glad you've come," cried the servant. "Your pa's run out like a raging bull, and I was feared lest he could 'urt you."

"I did not meet him," replied Iris, with a chill feeling in her heart. "Is Milly inside?"

"No, mum; that's why I am feared. Your pa was screeching out something about you and Miss Milly, an' I did believe as he was wanting to murder you both."

"Nonsense!" cried Iris irritably, as she entered the dining-room. "Dr. Lester is not well, and I daresay Miss Milly will be back soon. She—she has gone to see some friends," finished Iris, thinking she must make some excuse.

"Well, I 'ope she's safe, miss," said Eliza, ominously, "for if she meets her pa he'll hurt 'er. Jus' like a mad lion he were, miss."

When the servant withdrew Iris sat down and tried to eat; but all in vain. The excitement and trouble of the evening were too much for her, and she could only swallow a glass of wine and water. Eliza was informed that she might go to bed, and Iris sat up far into the night waiting for the return of Milly. Ten,

eleven and twelve o'clock struck; still the girl did not appear, and Iris became terrified. Such a thing had never happened before; and she felt sure that some accident had occurred. Several times she went to the door, but saw no one. At twelve she ventured as far as the gate, and then in the darkness she heard the tramp of feet, and saw several men advancing, bearing something between them. In front walked a man alone.

"Father!" cried Iris, throwing open the gate. "Milly!"

"Hush!" said the grave voice of Mr. Chaskin. "It is I, Miss Link. There has been an—an accident. Your sister is—dead!"

## CHAPTER V.

PAUL MEXTON, JOURNALIST.

BARNSTEAD was provided with a new sensation, and that of the most extreme kind. The beauty of the village—for so Milly was accounted—had been murdered by some unknown person, and everyone was excited by the tragedy. Far and wide the rumour spread, gaining details more or less truthful as it slipped from tongue to tongue, until by noon of the next day it reached Marborough. From the streets it penetrated into the office of the "Tory Times," which, as its name denotes, is an old and long-established newspaper of the south of England; and so became known to Paul Mexton, who was the chief reporter of the journal. The news appealed to him more than it did to the majority of the public.

In the first place, it roused his journalistic instincts, as eminently satisfactory "copy" for the columns of the paper; in the second, he was personally acquainted with the Lester family, and particularly with Iris. The late Mr. Link had been a solicitor in Marborough, and in that town Iris had been born, and had lived for seventeen years, when, her father dying, her mother had married Dr. Lester and had removed to Barnstead.



The second Mrs. Lester did not live long after her foolish second marriage, and when she died Iris was left to look after Milly and the miserable domestic affairs of Poverty Villa. But all this has been set forth before, and the main point now is the acquaintance of Mexton with Iris Link.

They had been boy and girl together, and Paul had been like a brother to Iris for many years. Twice or thrice a month he was accustomed to ride over to Barnstead, when permitted by his journalistic duties; and at one time Iris thought that their youthful friendship might develop into the warmer feeling of love. But, as has before been stated, she lost her heart to Herne, and later on Paul confessed to her that he was in love with a Polish lady who for some months previously had given violin recitals in the Marborough Town Hall. Therefore, up to the present Paul and Iris were simply good friends and nothing more.

Paul valued his friendship with Miss Link, as he was ambitious and she sympathised with his aims and aspirations. He wished to make a name in London as a novelist, to live in the metropolis, and to mix with the literary society of the day. To Iris he told all his dreams and schemes and successes and failures; and in her turn Iris consulted him about her domestic worries, the eccentricities of Dr. Lester, and the trials she experienced with Milly and her lovers. Paul, therefore, was well acquainted with the events which had preceded the tragedy; and now that the tragedy itself had taken place he was hardly surprised by its occurrence.

"I knew Milly would get herself into trouble, poor

girl!" he thought on hearing the news; "but I hardly expected her follies would result in her murder. I wonder who killed her, and what was the motive for the crime? By Jove! I'll ride over and see Iris; she needs a friend just now, and she can give me all details for the paper."

No sooner had Paul made up his mind to this course than he saw the editor, and requested permission to go over to Barnstead. It was accorded at once, and, knowing Mexton's ready pen, the editor anticipated an unusually interesting account of the crime, to be in the next day's issue of the "Tory Times." Prompt and rapid in his actions as a war correspondent, Paul was on the road to Barnstead within an hour of receiving the intelligence of the murder. But the police, advised by telegram, were beforehand with him, and he found the inspector—Drek was his name—investigating the matter when he arrived at Poverty Villa.

Drek was in the untidy garden talking to a policeman when Paul rode up, and he eyed the young man in anything but a pleasant manner when he dismounted. The inspector was an alert but somewhat sour man, who had no great love for press or pressman; and he distinctly resented the prompt arrival of Mexton on the scene. With a frown he looked at the keen and handsome face of the young man, and nodded curtly in response to his greeting.

"Where the corpse is there gather the vultures," said Drek, who dealt at times in proverbs.

"Are you talking of the police, Mr. Inspector?" asked Paul, smiling.

"No, sir; I talk of the Fourth Estate, of you con-

founded gabblers of the press. It is my business to investigate crimes like these; but it is not yours to spread any discoveries all over the country, and put the criminal on his guard."

"Oh! then you have some inkling of who killed Miss Lester?"

"No, sir; up till now I have not gained the slightest clue."

"Then why do you say that the criminal is a man?" said Paul shrewdly. "The assassin may be a woman, for all you know."

"Women don't fire pistols as a rule."

"The New Woman does," retorted Mexton. "So the poor girl was shot?"

"Right through the brain—must have been killed instantly."

"Where did the murder take place?"

"In the lower part of the Winding Lane."

"About what time?"

"I don't know yet. How should I know?" replied Drek with a vexed air. "Now, look here, Mr. Mexton; I'm not going to answer any more questions. You'll put all I say in your paper."

"I'll keep out anything you wish, Mr. Inspector," said Paul, who saw the necessity of conciliating the man; "and, as a matter of fact, I am here not so much to get copy as to see Miss Link."

"Why do you wish to see Miss Link?" asked the inspector suspiciously.

"For the very natural reason that she is in trouble, and that I am her oldest friend. You don't object to my seeing her?"

"She'll object herself," replied Drek grimly. "At present she shut herself up in her room and refuses to see anyone."

"What about Dr. Lester?"

"Oh!"—Drek shrugged his shoulders—"the doctor is in his consulting-room—drinking!"

"What does he say about the murder?"

"Nothing. I can get no sense out of him; the man's brain is upset."

"I don't wonder at it," rejoined Paul drily; "the tragic death of his daughter is quite enough to upset it. Is the—the—body in the house?"

"No; it has been taken to the Herne Arms for the inquest."

Mexton nodded, and brushed past the inspector on his way to the house. "I'll try and see Miss Link," he said quickly. "Poor girl, she will need some comfort. You have absolutely no clue?" he asked looking back.

"Absolutely none," returned Drek disconsolately. "The girl was found dead by Mr. Chaskin about midnight. I say, Mexton——"

"Well," said Paul impatiently, his hand on the door-knob.

"Tell me what Miss Link tells you."

"She may tell me nothing, Drek. However, I'll get all I can out of her, and do my best to aid you to catch the murderer of poor Milly Lester. And you?"

"I intend to question the servant," said Drek. "It seems she knows something; at least, she hinted as much to Warner here," and he indicated the policeman with a nod.

"H'm!" said Paul slowly. "So Eliza knows something. Drek, you tell me all that you get out of the servant, and I'll reveal the result of my examination of the mistress. Let us work together."

"I'm quite agreeable," said Drek, who knew the keen intelligence of Mexton, "but you must not put too much in your paper."

"You shall see everything in proof," cried Paul, and with a nod he vanished into the house.

There was nobody in the drawing-room or dining-room when Mexton entered; therefore he looked into the doctor's consulting-room, where he found the wretched Lester half-intoxicated, with the brandy bottle before him. Indignant at the man's condition at such a time, Paul walked over to the table, seized the bottle, and threw it out of the window. In sheer amazement Lester stared blankly at him, holding a glass of brandy in his shaking hand.

"What—what did you do that for?" he asked thickly.

"To prevent you making a beast of yourself," replied the young man sharply. "Have you no sense of shame, man? Your daughter is lying dead—murdered—and yet you sit drinking here as though nothing had occurred. Shame, Dr. Lester! Shame!"

The drunkard listened vacantly to this speech, and mechanically raised the glass he held to his lips. In a moment Paul had dashed it out of his hand, and put himself on the defensive for the attack which he expected the creature to make on him. In place of doing so, and asserting some little manhood, the doctor bowed his shameful face on his hands, and began to weep in a maudlin manner.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! that I should be treated like this in my own house! Poor Milly dead, and I denied any comfort."

"You won't get much comfort out of the brandy bottle," said Paul contemptuously. "Pull yourself together, Dr. Lester, and aid me."

"Aid you—in what?" asked Lester confusedly.

"In discovering who killed your daughter."

The doctor wrung his hands in a helpless sort of manner. "No chance of that," said he; "no chance of that."

"Why? Do you think the murderer has got clean away?"

To the journalist's surprise, Lester put the same question to him as he had put to Drek. "How do you know the criminal is a man?" asked the doctor.

"I did not say so."

"You said murderer; if you had ascribed the crime to a woman you would have used the more correct word, murderess."

"I think not, doctor; I am no purist. But what do you mean by such a speech, sir? Do you know who killed your daughter?"

"No!" Lester looked confused. "Good Lord, Mexton! how should I know?" he burst out. "If I did—if I did——"

"Well?" cried Mexton, impatiently, "if you did——?"

"I want some more brandy," said Lester, with a vacant look.

Paul was about to reply with some sharpness when he felt a light touch on his arm. It was Iris who had attracted his attention; and she had just entered quiet-

ly by the door. Her face was pallid as that of a corpse, her eyes were red and swollen with weeping, and she looked not at Mexton, but at the miserable creature who was her step-father. The expression in her eyes was one of mingled terror and repugnance.

"Don't speak to him any more, Paul," she said, hurriedly; "he is not in a condition to answer questions."

Mexton glanced at Lester, expecting him to make some defence; but the man was rapidly lapsing into a comatose condition. Without another word, he submitted to the pressure on his arm, and was drawn out of the room by Iris. In the passage she stopped and withdrew her hand.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I came to see you, Iris; to assure you of my sympathy."

"Is that true?"—she looked searchingly at him—"or did you come to learn all the particulars of our shame, to publish them to the world?"

"Whatever I publish will be in your favour," retorted Paul. "I am your friend—not your enemy."

"My friend? God knows I need one! I suppose everyone in Marborough knows that Milly is dead?"

"Yes; many people know."

"And that she was—murdered?"

"They know that also."

Iris looked at him strangely. "Who do they say killed her?" she demanded.

"Nobody knows; nobody ventures an opinion."

"Has any name been mentioned?"

"No. I have come over here to offer my services——"

"To the police?" she burst out, clutching his arm.

"To you," replied Mexton. "Let me help you to find the criminal."

"He will never be found."

"It is a man, then?" said Mexton, for the third time.

"He will never be found," repeated Iris coldly—"never."

"But if I search I may——"

"Paul," she said in a low tone—"as you value my friendship, never look for the assassin of Milly—never, never, never!"



## CHAPTER VI.

### ELIZA'S EVIDENCE.

BEFORE Paul could express his surprise at the strange remark of Iris, she left him, with a warning glance. Still, astonished both at her speech and action, he was about to follow, when Inspector Drek made his appearance. He beckoned to Mexton in a peremptory manner.

"I am about to examine the servant in the drawing-room," he said hurriedly; "you can be present if you like."

"As you please," answered Mexton, with feigned indifference. "She may throw some light on the subject."

"Has Miss Link done so?"

"No. I saw her for a few moments only; but she said nothing worth talking about."

In making this statement Paul did violence to his own opinion; for, on consideration of the last remark made by Iris, he was persuaded that she knew more about the matter than she chose to tell. She did not want him to search for the criminal, therefore it would appear that she was aware of the identity of the guilty person, and did not want him, or her—for it might be

a woman—arrested. But why should she thus side with the murderer of her sister? Paul could find no feasible answer to this question.

Eliza made her appearance in the drawing-room in a state of hardly-controlled excitement, and took her seat before Mr. Inspector and Paul with the air of one who considers herself of the greatest importance. She was a constant reader of novels, and now fancied that she was the heroine of a story in real life. Short, red-faced and fat, Eliza wore the honours thus thrust upon her with an air of dignity. But these airs and graces were completely thrown away on Drek, who spoke to her sharply, and gave no latitude in answering. There was no romance about the inspector.

"Well, Eliza," said he, looking her up and down, "and what do you know about this murder?"

"Sir," replied the servant, with dignity, "I don't know much, but I guess a lot."

"That is not to the point. We want facts, not fancies. Do you know who killed this poor girl?"

"I 'ave my suspicions, Mr. Policeman."

"To whom do your suspicions point?"

"To my master, sir—to Dr. Lester."

"Nonsense!" said Drek, while Paul started up with an exclamation of surprise. "You do not dare to say that Dr. Lester killed his own daughter—knowingly?"

"That's just where it is, Mr. Policeman. He killed her, I could swear; but he didn't know what he was doin'."

"Perhaps you will explain?"

"Certainly, Mr. Policeman. Last night my master was drinking hard, and had had words with Miss Iris

on the subject of the late deceased. Miss Iris went to look for the corpse before nine o'clock——”

“What do you mean by that expression?” interrupted Mexton. “Miss Lester was not dead then; and if she was, Miss Link, ignorant of her fate, could not have gone to look for a ‘corpse!’”

“I don’t quite mean that, sir,” said Eliza, rather confused that her attempt at eloquence had proved so misleading; “what I do mean is that Miss Milly ‘adn’t come ‘ome before nine, and Miss Iris went to look for her.”

“I understand. But what about Dr. Lester?”

“He stayed in, drinking brandy, and when he was quite mad he went out with a pistol to look for his daughter.”

“How do you know?” asked Drek, rather startled by this explicit evidence.

“Because I was watchin’ and listenin’,” said Eliza with great candour. “I thought, as he was drinking, he might smash the furniture, according to custom; and Miss Iris, she asked me always to perreck the furniture, if needs be. I watched the door of the consulting-room, gentlemen, and I seed Dr. Lester come out with a weapon in ‘is ‘and——”

“A pistol?”

“Yes, Mr. Policeman, a double-barril revolver. He rushed out, screeching that Miss Milly was a—well,” said Eliza, checking herself, “I can’t say what he called her, but it was somethin’ bad, you may be sure. I waited in, with great ‘orror, sir, and when Miss Iris came back, I was glad to see she weren’t a corpse. I

thought as Dr. Lester might have met 'er, and killed 'er right out."

Drek and the journalist glanced at one another, for this candidly-delivered evidence certainly seemed to implicate Lester. "What did Miss Link say when you told her that Dr. Lester had gone out?" demanded Mexton hurriedly.

"She seemed 'orror-struck, like me, sir; and then I went to bed, and she waited for the corpse. It arrived about midnight with Mr. Chaskin. I was woke up by a wild screech, Mr. Policeman, and came down to find the tragedy. For the rest of the night we all sat up till morning, when the deceased was taken for the inquitch to the Herne Arms, where she now is, an' may the Lord 'ave mercy on 'er soul," finished Eliza, with clasped hands.

"What time did Dr. Lester return?"

"In the mornin' at seven o'clock. He 'ad been wanderin' about all night, and tumbling into the mud. Miss Iris made him take off his clothes, 'cause they were all over red clay, an' he's been sitting drinkin' ever since."

"Red clay!" repeated Drek sharply. "And the corpse was found by Mr. Chaskin in the Winding Lane."

"What of that?" asked Paul, curiously.

"Simply this: that red clay is found in the Winding Lane, and owing to the late rain there is a good deal of mud about there. Dr. Lester must have been in the Winding Lane last night."

"An' so was Miss Milly," cried Eliza; "they found 'er remains there."

There was silence for a few moments, and the three people looked at one another. All the evidence seemed to prove the guilt of Dr. Lester. He had gone out mad with drink and angry with the dead girl; he had taken with him a pistol, and Milly had been murdered by such a weapon; finally, his clothes were covered with red mud, which was most plentiful in the neighbourhood where the corpse had been found. On this circumstantial evidence it would seem that Dr. Lester had killed his own daughter in a fit of drunken frenzy. This discovery added to the horror of the crime.

"My girl," said the inspector after a pause, "have you spoken of this to any one else?"

"No, sir; I swear as I 'asn't breathed a word."

"Then don't breathe a word till I tell you," said Drek shortly. "You can go now—and hold your tongue. Wait!" he added, with an afterthought, "where are the clothes Dr. Lester wore last night?"

"I can get them, sir; they are in 'is bedroom."

"Bring them at once to the consulting-room."

When Eliza departed on this errand, Paul looked at Drek in a questioning manner. "Why do you wish the clothes brought to the consulting-room?" he demanded.

"I want to demand an explanation of Dr. Lester."

"He is too drunk to understand you."

"No, he isn't. I saw him a few minutes ago, and he was coming round. Besides, a knowledge of his position will sober him."

"Do you really believe he killed his own daughter?"

"It would seem so," said Drek in a perplexed tone; "but—"

"But what?"

"Well," explained the inspector sagely, "I have been mixed up in one or two cases of this sort before, and I always mistrust evidence that is too plain."

"You speak in riddles."

"H'm! Maybe; but I tell you I doubt this evidence. It is all dead against Lester; still—"

Paul interrupted. "The best thing to do is to question Lester himself," he said, "force him either into confession or into defence."

"It is the most straightforward way," assented Drek rising. "Let us go into the consulting-room at once and look at the clothes."

"And look for the revolver," suggested Paul significantly.

The inspector nodded, and they sought the presence of Dr. Lester. The wretched creature was recovering his senses, and as they entered he was drinking long draughts from the water-bottle to clear his head. At the sound of their footsteps he started nervously, and turned towards them a white and haggard face. Paul wondered whether his looks and manner were due to drink or to guilt; certainly to one, perhaps to both.

"Do you want to see me, gentlemen?" said the doctor, rising, with shaking limbs.

"Yes," said Drek, with a keen glance at the wreck before him. "I wish to ask you a few questions."

"Relative to the murder of my poor girl?"

"Relative to the red mud on your clothes."

"Red mud!" stammered Lester, with what appeared to be genuine amazement. "I have no red mud on my clothes!" and he looked down at his apparel.

"I refer to the clothes you wore last night," said Drek shortly.

At this moment Eliza entered with a bundle, which she threw on the floor; and to this Drek turned his attention. Coat, trousers, and waist-coat were all of light-grey cloth, and on the arms of the coat and the knees of the trousers were splashes of dried mud, red in hue. The inspector glanced at them, then at the startled face of Lester, and searched the pockets with a practised hand. He could not find a single article in any one of them.

"Where is the pistol, Dr. Lester?" he asked, rising from his knees.

"Pistol! What pistol?" said Lester, with a nervous tremour.

"The revolver which you took out last night."

"How—how do you know I took a revolver out last night?" asked the doctor, with a start.

"I saw you take it out, sir," broke in Eliza. "You took it out to kill Miss Milly!"

Lester gave a cry of alarm, and fell back in his chair. "Are—are you mad?" he said. "I—I—kill—kill my own daughter!"

"Well, you said you wanted to last night," persisted Eliza.

"No—no—no!" cried the doctor, covering his face. "It is impossible!"

"Improbable, but not impossible," corrected Drek. "Where is the revolver?"

"I don't know; I—I lost it."

"Where?"

"I tell you I don't know; I can't remember," said the wretched man.

"Dr. Lester," said the inspector in a stern manner, "let me advise you to be careful, sir, for you stand in a very dangerous position. There is evidence against you that you killed your daughter."

"I tell you it's impossible!" shrieked Lester, the perspiration beading on his forehead. "I kill Milly! I loved her! I would not kill a fly! I—I—O God!—Mexton, you don't believe that I killed Milly?"

"I can't say," said Paul, sorry for the man, although he was doubtful of his innocence. "The servant here says you were angry with Milly last night, and went out with a revolver in search of her."

"No, no! I went in search of Lovel."

"Lovel?" cried Drek, astonished by the introduction of this new name—"what had Mr. Lovel to do with it?"

"He was with my daughter last night; Iris said he was."

"At what time?"

"Between eight and nine o'clock. Milly was in love with him, and as she was engaged to Herne, I was angry with Lovel. I went out to threaten him, but not to kill him, or her—no, no!"

"Where did you go?" asked Paul quickly.

"I don't know, I can't remember. I left this house with a pistol, and that is the last thing I can recall till I found myself at dawn in my own garden."

"There is red mud on your clothes," said Drek, "so



you must have been in the Winding Lane, where the red mud is most plentiful."

"I might have been. What of that?"

"Simply this: the dead body of your daughter was found in the Winding Lane. She was shot through the head, and you went out with a pistol."

"O God!" Lester clasped his hands together in an agonised way. "Do you think I killed her?"

"I do," said Drek. "I firmly believe it—so much so that I intend to arrest you on the evidence."

Dr. Lester shook all over, made an attempt to speak, and fell fainting on the floor. In the minds of the three spectators there was no doubt of his guilt. He had gone out to kill Lovel; and by mistake, or mischance, he had killed his own daughter. The assassin of Milly Lester was her own father.

## CHAPTER VII.

### AT THE VICARAGE.

FROM Poverty Villa, with its guilty occupant, Paul wandered through the village, into the neighbourhood of The Herne Arms. A crowd of people, more or less excited, filled the tap-room of the inn, and the space before it. Many were drinking ale at the bar, others idled outside in the street, and all were vigorously discussing the tragedy and surmising as to who was the criminal. Some hinted at Lovel, a known admirer of the dead girl; others boldly accused a nameless tramp of the crime, and declared that robbery was the motive for its committal; but no one had the courage or the fancy to hint at the possible guilt of the drunken father. Such an idea, owing to the relationship, was too monstrous to be entertained even by the most imaginative.

Paul, with unusual caution—for ordinarily he was an impulsive man—said nothing, but wandered from group to group, gathering opinions but offering none in exchange. There was no need for him to conjecture the name of the assassin. He knew that Dr. Lester had committed the crime, and that before twelve hours elapsed he would be arraigned on cir-

cumstantial evidence; perhaps, if his conscience proved trustworthy, on his own confession. Great as had been the horror inspired by the murder, the arrest of the wretched father of the victim would enhance that horror four-fold. Mexton knew this, but out of sheer humanity for the miserable criminal he held his peace.

The crowd babbled on, discussed the affair over their tankards, and looked up with awe at the windows, the drawn curtains of which notified that the dead body of Milly Lester was lying within. Policemen guarded the door of the room and the approach to the stairs, so that no one could enter. Paul Mexton had little desire to do so; he did not wish to see the still white face, which he had last beheld full of life and beauty and girlish vanity. Sick at heart, he turned away from inn and crowd and all the chatter of the market-place, to take his way to the Vicarage. On arriving there he inquired for Mr. Chaskin.

So far as his journal was concerned, Paul had collected sufficient "copy" for a long and interesting article; therefore it was with no zeal for his profession that he sought the clergyman. But the theory of the idlers before the inn, that a tramp might have killed Milly in order to rob her, inspired him with a faint hope that Lester might be innocent. All the evidence, that of Eliza, that of the mud-stained clothes, that of the pistol, pointed to the guilt of the unhappy father. Nevertheless, a man has been hanged before on circumstantial evidence and afterwards has proved guiltless of the crime for which he suffered; so it might be, thought Paul, that Dr. Lester was not guilty of this

monstrous act of criminality. If the body had been robbed of jewellery and purse, these facts might hint at a vulgar murder by a tramp. Chaskin had found the corpse of the girl; therefore Chaskin was the necessary witness to prove the theory of a robbery. In the character of Dr. Lester's friend and well-wisher, Paul presented himself at the Vicarage to question Mr. Chaskin. Upon the result of the interview hung the question of Lester's guilt or innocence. The chances were greatly in favour of the former.

At first the servant who opened the door refused to admit Mexton. She declared that Mr. Chaskin was within, but stated that he was particularly engaged, and had given orders not to be disturbed. Paul scribbled a line on his card to the effect that his business was important with regard to the discovery of the assassin, and told the girl to ask Mr. Chaskin to afford him an interview on these grounds. After some hesitation the servant conveyed the message and shortly afterwards showed Mexton into the presence of the clergyman.

Mr. Chaskin was in his study, a comfortable room, which had somewhat of a sacerdotal atmosphere in its appointments and furnishing. There were many books lining the walls in bare and unpretentious bookshelves; a small altar in one corner with a bronze crucifix thereon; and several pictures of Catholic saints here and there. On the desk before the window another crucifix was standing amid a litter of papers, and beside the desk itself a chair was placed, hinting to the ready mind of Paul that Mr. Chaskin had been

engaged with a visitor when he accorded him the interview.

Evidently the visitor had vanished through a small door on the right, wishing to escape unseen. Paul wondered who this unknown person might be, and why he or she had departed with such unnecessary haste and mystery. At the very door Paul felt that an uncomfortable and uneasy atmosphere pervaded the apartment.

The Vicar rose to his feet with an agitated air as Paul entered, and looked at the young man with the card in his hand. He seemed much moved, for his lean, ascetic face was white and drawn, his breathing quick and hurried. Not till the servant had closed the door did he speak, and then he addressed his visitor with a tremour in his strong voice.

"You come at an inconvenient time, Mr. Mexton," he said, hurriedly. "I was engaged with a friend; but your writing here"—he touched the card—"hinted at a matter of such importance that I decided to see you."

"I am sorry to interrupt you," replied Paul, taking the chair near the desk, "and you may be sure I should not have done so without a good reason."

"I am sure of that," said Chaskin, still standing, "but I hope your reason is not connected with your duties to your journal."

"No; it is connected with my friendship for the dead girl and for her father."

"Dr. Lester. Ah, I am sorry for him, in spite of his vice of drinking. The loss of his daughter will be a great blow to him. Where is he now, Mr. Mexton?"

"In his own house," said Paul, slowly, "under arrest."

"Under arrest!" repeated the Vicar, staring at the young man. "For what?"

"For the murder of his daughter."

"Mr. Mexton!" The clergyman fell back into his chair as though he had been shot, and turned even paler. "Impossible!" he groaned; "impossible!"

"Unfortunately, it is true," said Paul, sadly—"and on these grounds;" whereupon he rapidly detailed the evidence upon which Drek intended to obtain a warrant for arrest. Chaskin listened with clasped hands, the beads of perspiration bedewing his high forehead, and did not make any comment upon the intelligence until Paul had finished. Then he spoke slowly and with an effort.

"It points to the guilt of the poor creature," said he, raising his head; "but for all that I cannot believe that Dr. Lester committed a crime so abhorrent to human nature."

"I don't think he did it knowingly, Mr. Chaskin," replied Paul; "he declares that he remembers nothing of the events of the night. Might he not have killed his daughter while under the influence of drink? Not knowingly, as I say, but guided mechanically by his confused intelligence?"

"No," cried Chaskin, with a negative gesture. "No—no. Impossible!"

"Quite impossible," said a calm voice behind them. Paul turned his head to see who had interrupted their conversation, and at the side door beheld Darcy Herne. Evidently he was the visitor with whom

Chaskin had been talking prior to the visit of the journalist.

"Quite impossible," reiterated Herne, advancing into the room. "I agree with my friend, Mr. Mexton. Whosoever killed my poor Milly, it was not her miserable father."

Paul said nothing for a moment, being taken up with an examination of the intruder. The squire was a man of middle height, lean even to emaciation; and, clothed in black as he was, from head to foot, he looked of greater stature than he actually was. His face was clean shaven and handsome, though not strikingly so; but his eyes were hard and glittering, and perpetually changing their expression. They were the eyes of a leader of men, but of a fanatic; of a man rendered pitiless by religious mania. There was no softness, no tenderness in them; but they flashed like stars, brilliant as diamonds; the eyes of a Loyola, of a Torquemada. Darcy Herne was a reformer, a fanatic; in earlier times he would have been a prophet; but in whatever age he lived he would always have preserved the characteristics of a nature frozen and narrowed by a devouring devotion to religion. There was nothing loveable about the man; and it was little to be wondered at that the dead girl had feared him. The curious thing was that she could have brought herself to accept the attentions of this religious machine.

"I did not know you were here, Mr. Herne," said Paul, without replying to the remark made by the squire.

"I came down to-day," replied Darcy, taking a

chair. "It was not my intention to return until this evening, but my friend Chaskin telegraphed me about the death of Milly, so here I am."

He spoke with great deliberation and calmness; so much so that Paul stared at him in surprise, and wondered how he could be so social in the face of such a tragedy as the murder of his future wife. Paul had known Herne for many years, having met him frequently at the Lesters, and he had always had an unpleasant feeling towards him. Now that the man proved himself to be so devoid of any tender feeling towards the dead girl, Mexton felt that his latent distaste was developing into positive dislike. Perhaps he showed his feelings too plainly, for Chaskin bent forward and touched him on the knee.

"You must not think that my friend is heartless because he does not exhibit much sorrow," said he; "he feels this terrible event deeply."

"I feel it more than you or Mexton can imagine," said Herne, with an impressive look on his face. "I selected Millicent Lester to be my wife in order to save her from the snares which her beauty and vanity were laying for her. I designed that she should help me in my life-work of succoring the poor and lowly and oppressed. With her beauty and my wealth, I imagined in my vain pride that we would be powerful instruments in the hand of an all-guiding Providence; but alas! God has brought her down to the grave and myself He has left without a helpmate."

During this speech Herne had risen to his feet, and he delivered it with outstretched hand, in oratorical style. Paul was quite used to the vagaries of the man,



but he resented the cold way in which he spoke of the poor girl as a lost instrument, and not as a human being, a beautiful woman done to death in a violent fashion. Chaskin seemed to resent it also, for he looked reprovingly at Herne—a look which was entirely lost on the fanatic. Not only did he disregard the warning, but he proceeded to talk of his private matters as though they were of greater moment than the murder.

“Do you know what I have been doing in London, Mr. Mexton?” he said in measured tones. “I have been seeing a young woman who has the cause of the oppressed at heart, and will aid me to lighten their burden. It is true that at present she is exercising the light and frivolous profession of a musician; but I hope to wean her from these vanities. A Polish girl must aid her downtrodden countrymen.”

“A Polish girl!” cried Paul, with a start. “A musician—a violinist”

“Yes; Catinka. Do you know her?”

“A little. I saw her some months ago in Marborough, where she gave a concert. I rather admired her,” concluded Paul, blushing.

“She is beautiful,” replied Herne quietly, “but I do not look to the outward form, but into the mind. She is concerned to raise up her fallen race and she desires me to aid her. I hope to do so. Who knows?” cried Darcy, with a flash of his brilliant eyes, “she may be designed by God to replace my lost Milly?”

“I rather think it is of Milly we should speak, Herne,” said Chaskin, reprovingly. “Leave off think-

ing of this Catinka, and let us see what we can do to prove the innocence of Dr. Lester."

"I am at your service," said Herne, the fire dying out of his eyes. "I am convinced that Dr. Lester did not kill the girl."

"Then who did?" demanded Paul, frankly.

Herne turned and looked at him steadily. "Lucas Lovel," said he, in composed tones.

"Impossible!" said Chaskin and Mexton together.

"I don't think so," persisted Herne. "Lucas Lovel wanted to marry Milly—to ween her from me; and frequently met her on the common and in the Winding Lane. I was told about these meetings by a certain person who shall be nameless; but I said nothing, trusting to Milly's true heart. I believed that she was true to me; and that for such a reason Lovel killed her."

"But Lovel was not with her on Sunday night."

"I believe he was," said Darcy, "although I have no means of proving it. I intend to see Mr. Lovel and force him into confession; but before doing so I wish to examine the spot where the murder took place."

"For what reason?" asked Chaskin, hurriedly.

"To search for evidence. Let us go now, while the daylight lasts. Mr. Mexton, you will come also?"

"Willingly," said Paul, rising. "I wish to see the spot, too; indeed, I came here to ask Mr. Chaskin for all particulars regarding the finding of the body."

"Why?" asked the clergyman, quickly.

"Because I wish to prove the innocence of Dr. Lester. Black as is the evidence against him, I cannot

think that he killed his own daughter. The murder may have been committed by a tramp for robbery."

"No," said Herne, doggedly. "Lovel killed her."

"Mr. Chaskin," said Paul, taking no notice of his interruption, "were the earrings and rings and bracelets of Milly on the body when you found it?"

"Yes," replied Chaskin, promptly, "they were; and her purse was in her pocket also. I thought the murder might be due to robbery, and I examined the body carefully; but nothing had been touched. It was lying with outspread hands face downwards. Apparently the poor girl had been shot from behind and fell prone on her face stone dead."

"Nothing was touched," murmured Paul to himself. "Then that disposes of my tramp theory. Whatever the motive of the crime, it was not robbery."

"Of course not," said Darcy, quickly; "it was jealousy."

"Of the dead girl?"

"Of me—on the part of Lovel. I believe he killed her."

"He would not commit a crime for so slight a cause," protested Chaskin.

"Why not? Lovel has gipsy blood in his veins; he told me so himself, and his passions once roused he does not care what he says or does. Face to face with him, I'll force him into a confession."

"Then you believe that Dr. Lester is innocent?"

"As innocent as I believe Lovel is guilty!" replied Herne, with emphasis.

After this direct statement, Chaskin and Mexton felt there was no more to be said.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### IN THE WINDING LANE.

BETWEEN the common and the village there extended a fairly broad belt of trees which sprang from a deep-red soil, apparently volcanic in its origin. Through this wood there ran a narrow road in many a curve, purposely made tortuous so as to prolong the pleasure of walking under the shade of leafy boughs in the hot days of summer. From its formation this pathway—for it was little else—was called the Winding Lane, and at either end there was a stile shutting it in, so that no vehicles or horses could pass, but had to gain the common or village by the broad high road which skirted the town. Along the lane seats were placed for the convenience of passers-by, and in the long summer twilights the youths and maidens of Barnstead were accustomed to rest thereon and exchange love talk. Most of the marriages among the peasantry rose from meetings and promises in the Winding Lane.

But as yet there had been no tragedy in this pleasant pathway, and it was with feelings of consternation that the villagers heard of the Lester murder. Henceforth tradition and imagination and winter tales would

invest the spot with ghostly interest. Already the lovers of the village declared that nothing would induce them to seek the lane after twilight, lest they should meet the spectre of the murdered girl. And this when the tragedy had been enacted only a few hours! Think, then, how such a statement would grow into an established belief when the circumstances of the death became sanctified by time!

Chaskin led his two companions through the wood, until he paused close beside the stile which barred the lane at that end from the common. Several rustics were examining the spot with eager interest; but on seeing squire and vicar they made speed to leave the lane before their arrival, lest they should be reproved for morbid curiosity. One heavy ploughman, however, was slow in going, and before he could hasten out of earshot, Herne called on him to wait. This the yokel did unwillingly enough, and looked rather afraid when the squire addressed him directly.

"Brent," said Herne, while his companions waited in wonder to know why he had stopped the man, "were you in the lane last night?"

"Ees, squire, I be," replied Brent, sheepishly.

"About what time?"

"Arter church, Squoire; between eight and nine."

"Were there many people in the lane?"

"Noa, Squoire; theer were a Methody meetin' at t'other end of Barnstead, and arter pass'n preached they all goas theer t' 'ear the caal for unconverted sinners."

"But you were in the lane?"

"Ees, Squire; I wos wi' Jaane Bilway; butt she made me taake her t' th' Methody Chapel alsoa."

"About what time did you leave this place?"

"Jest before nine."

"Did you see Miss Lester here?"

"Noa, sir."

"Did you see Mr. Lovel?"

"Noa, sir."

"Well—did you see anyone?" asked Herne impatiently.

"Noa, Squire; I see noabody."

"Did you hear the shot fired?"

"Ees, I did, Squire. I was passin' t' church wi' Jaane Bilway when I 'eard it. "Uilo!" ses I, 'there's some poachin' goin' on'; and I wanted to goa back and see; but Jaane she ses, 'Giles, you're a fule; 'tain't nothin',' soa I goes on wi' 'er to the Methody Chapel."

"About what time was the shot fired?" asked Paul, regardless of a frown from the squire.

"Just about nine, sir. T'clock was striking when I 'eard the shot."

"And you saw no one when in the lane?" said Herne, giving Brent a shilling.

"Noa, Squire, not one soul, I sweer."

"Very good, Brent. You can go."

The man pulled a rough forelock and slouched off heavily. Herne looked after him with a frown, and afterwards turned towards the clergyman with a sharp look of interrogation. "Do you believe what that fellow says, Chaskin?" he demanded.

"Yes; I see no reason why he should lie."

"H'm! the reason might be found in his pocket."

"What do you mean, Herne?" asked Paul, sharply.

"Simply that Brent has been bribed."

"By whom, man?"

"By Lovel. Don't contradict me," said Herne, in authoritative tones. "I am certain of what I say. Milly came to this lane last night, else she would not have been found dead by yonder stile. She must have come to meet someone; and going on what has been told to me, the person she came to meet could only have been Lovel. If they walked up the lane together, they must have been seen by Brent and Jane Bilway. Lovel would be unwilling that I should be told of these stolen meetings, therefore he bribed the man to hold his tongue."

"Herne," burst out Chaskin, who had restrained himself with difficulty during this speech, "do you know what you are saying? You are accusing Brent of a felony—that is," corrected the vicar, "assuming that your belief that Lovel killed the girl is true. If Brent saw Lovel here he must believe the same thing, and he would not hold his tongue knowing that murder had been done."

"That depends on the amount of the bribe," said Herne, grimly; "but I'll find that out later. I am certain that Lovel was here and killed Milly."

"Why not ask Lovel himself?" suggested Paul, looking up. "Here he comes across the common."

"Wants to see the scene of his crime, no doubt!" said the squire, fiercely.

"Herne, you are unjust!" protested Chaskin.

"Wait till I speak with Lovel, and then judge, my friend."

The Vicar silently agreed with this remark, and the three men watched Lovel as he walked slowly towards the site. On catching sight of the trio he hesitated, and half stopped; but almost immediately he resumed his usual pace, and came towards them. Jumping over the stile, he made as to pass them with a hurried nod; but the squire, with a grim smile, placed himself in his path. So pointed was the movement that Lovel, much against his will, had no alternative but to stop. He looked pale and haggard, and was not dressed with usual care; otherwise he gave no sign of inward perturbation, but was calm and collected when he faced Herne.

"A word with you, Mr. Lovel," said Darcy, sharply.

"A dozen," replied Lovel, as sharply, "provided they are addressed to me in the terms one gentleman usually employs to another."

"Oh, I shall be as polite as you please," sneered the squire, with an ugly smile, "so long as you answer my questions."

"I shall answer your questions if I can, Mr. Herne."

"Very good, sir. Then tell me why you met Miss Lester in this lane, on this spot, last night."

Lovel turned a shade paler, and moistened his dry lips; but he faced his questioner unflinchingly and replied clearly, without hesitation, "I did not meet Miss Lester last night," said he, deliberately.

"I have reason to believe the contrary," retorted Herne, at white heat.

"Give me your reason, and I will disprove it," was the reply of Lovel.



"A certain person wrote to me that you intended to meet Miss Lester."

"What is the name of your informant?"

"I decline to give it, Mr. Lovel."

"In that case," said Lucas, moving on, "I must decline to answer further questions."

"No!" cried Herne, laying a strong grasp on the arm of the young man, "you don't escape me that way, you—you murderer!"

"Murderer!" repeated Lovel, shaking off the grip of the other. "What do you mean?"

"Mean, sir?—that you shot Miss Lester; that you killed my promised wife!"

"You are mad to make so monstrous an accusation!" said Lovel, sharply. "I would not have hurt a hair of Miss Lester's head. I—I—I respected her too much."

"You mean you loved her too much," scoffed Herne.

Lovel shrugged his shoulders, and turning his back on the squire addressed himself to Chaskin and Mex-ton. "Gentlemen," he said, "Mr. Herne is evidently upset by the death of Miss Lester, and not responsible for his speech. I should advise you to take him home."

"But you can assure him that you did not meet Miss Lester last night?" said Chaskin.

"What!" cried Lovel, ironically, "do you believe also that I did? I beg your pardon; I see you are Herne's most intimate friend, and must stand up for him."

"I can stand up for myself with the help of God," said Herne, fiercely; "you need not lie to me, Lovel."

I know you loved Millicent Lester, and that you met her several times during my absence. You wanted to marry her and draw her into worldly paths."

Lovel faced round with black wrath on his face, and burst out in a fury, "I wanted to save her from you!" he cried, clenching his hands. "I loved her with a love of which your cold, frigid nature is incapable. Yes, I met her several times, and I urged her to break off the marriage with a man who desired to use her in order to minister to his vanity. You would have made a nun of the poor girl; you would have tortured her heart with your infernal religious fanaticism; and from that fate I wished to rescue her. Much as I deplore her death, I am glad she died rather than marry you!"

"I believe that—you mocker and profligate! you—"

"Profligate!" repeated Lovel, in disdain. "And what are you—in London? Here you are a saint, with your religion and aspirations; but what are you when with Catinka?"

"Catinka," cried Mexton, astonished at Lovel's knowledge of the name.

"Yes; the Polish violinist, with her Anarchistic plots against the Czar. The woman who uses her beauty to snare men into conspiracy and devilment. I knew her before you did, Herne, and I know she wanted me to become her slave and fellow-conspirator; but I escaped and came down here out of her way. I heard how you met her, and I know how you love her——"

"Liar! I do not love her!"

"You do—you do!" declared Lovel furiously; "you love her, and it was at her house that you wasted your

time in London when supposed to be absent on religious missions. I intended to tell all your wickedness to Miss Lester last night——”

“Ah! you met her! I knew it!”

“I did not meet her,” returned Lovel haughtily; “she left the church in the middle of the service, and I did not see her again. This morning I heard of her death; but I am as innocent of it as you are.”

“I don’t believe it!” said Herne in hard tones. “I believe you met her, and because she would not leave me for you, you killed her.”

“I deny that I did, Herne; but since you accuse me, it remains for you to make good your accusation.”

“I shall do so—and hang you for your crime!”

“Take care the halter does not go round your own neck.”

“What! do you accuse me of the murder?”

“I accuse no one. I leave it to you, Mr. Herne, to make accusations which you cannot prove. Good-day to you all. Herne, you know where I live; any time you wish me to meet you I shall do so. But,” added Lucas scornfully, “till you have evidence, I should advise you to restrain your tongue. I may not be so patient at our next meeting.”

Lovel walked away with a proud and defiant air, but Herne made no attempt to follow. He stood quite still, pale and motionless, with a glassy look in his eyes, and his mouth slightly open. Paul turned from watching the retreating figure of Lovel, to address him, and recoiled from this frozen look with an exclamation of alarm.

“Chaskin! What is the matter with Herne?”

The clergyman turned round, and seeing the rigidity of his friend, went forward and shook his arm. "It is one of his trances," he said composedly, "and will pass in a few moments. The excitement of speaking with Lovel has thrown him into it."

"Is he often like this?"

"No; only when his nervous system is wrought up by unusual excitement. As a rule it is his religious emotions which throw him into these states."

"Can he move?"

"Not unless he is guided; see!" Here Chaskin took Herne's arm, and led him down the road. The squire moved stiffly, like an automaton, with unseeing eyes staring straight before him. "Otherwise, Mr. Mex-ton," continued the Vicar, "he remains standing, or sitting, or lying, in precisely the same attitude as when in his trance."

"Can't you wake him out of this cataleptic state?"

"There is no need to," rejoined Chaskin; "he will come out of it as suddenly as he has fallen into it. The time varies, that is all; he may remain thus for an hour, or recover himself in a few moments. See—he is getting better now."

At that moment the eyelids of Herne quivered, a sigh issued from his half-open mouth, and a sudden colour flushed his face. In another minute he looked round and spoke quite naturally. "Where is Lovel?" he demanded.

"Gone away," replied Chaskin, taking his friend's arm; "and I think we had better go too."

"No," said Herne, who seemed quite unaware of his trance; "we must search this spot." He looked round

at the trees, and down on the red soil. Suddenly he picked up a feather—that of a goose, apparently—which was stained in attractive bands of red, yellow, blue, and green.

“The Rainbow Feather!” he cried in a tone of terror; “and here—the Rainbow Feather!”

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE INQUEST AT HERNE ARMS.

THERE were many people in Barnstead on the day when the inquest was held on the body of Milly Lester. The youth and beauty of the poor girl, the tragic circumstances of her death, and the knowledge, which was now spread widely abroad, that Dr. Lester was the assassin, all invested the affair with wondrous interest. From far and near people poured into Barnstead to hear the evidence of the father's guilt even at second hand; and crowds repaired to the Winding Lane in order to examine the fatal spot. Never had such excitement been known in the somnolent village.

The coroner and jury were assembled in the largest room of The Herne Arms, and after surveying the body of the victim, they called all necessary witnesses to testify to the manner of her death, and the guilt of him who had brought it about. Drek had prepared his case against Dr. Lester with great care, being now convinced by the strongest of circumstantial evidence that he was the murderer. As yet Lester had not been arrested, but Drek had kept him constantly under his own eye, and had in his pocket a warrant for his arrest. This he intended to execute as soon as the jury

delivered their verdict. He had no doubt as to what the verdict would be.

Darcy Herne was present at the inquest, and several times he asserted his belief in the innocence of Dr. Lester. When Lester himself, pale and haggard, arrived at the inn, under the escort of Drek, the squire shook him by the hand in the warmest manner. Lester was much touched by this proof of friendship from one who had never regarded him with much approval.

"It is good of you to give me your hand, Herne," he said in a faltering voice, "particularly as you know the cloud that lies over my reputation."

"It is for that reason I do it, Lester. I believe you to be innocent."

"Ah," sighed Lester, passing his hand across his eyes, "I wish I could believe that myself."

Herne was rather amazed by this strange speech, and replied rather stiffly: "You must certainly know if you shot Milly or not?"

"That is just what I don't know," retorted Lester with a haggard look. "I left home under the influence of drink and with a pistol in my possession, angry with Milly for the way in which she was deceiving you. I recollect nothing after that until I found myself at dawn in my own garden; the events of the night have vanished from my mind; my memory is a complete blank. Who knows but what I may not have shot my poor Milly unknowingly?"

"H'm!" said Herne, thoughtfully; "in a condition like that you would certainly act in accordance with the uppermost thought in your mind. Was it to kill Milly?"

"God forbid! Even in my drunken frenzy I had no thought of harming my own flesh and blood. I wanted to kill the man who was to meet her—Lucas Lovel."

"How do you know that he was going to meet her on that night?" asked Herne, eagerly.

"I did not know for certain," replied Lester, "but as Milly had not come home, I thought she might be with Lovel. She met him before, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Darcy, gloomily. "Well, if you went out to kill Lovel, you would not shoot at your own daughter."

"She might have thrown herself in the way to protect Lovel."

"I doubt it. But only Lovel can prove that, and he denies that he met her on that night."

"Do you believe him?"

"No!" said Herne savagely. "I received a note in London which advised me that they were going to meet."

"Who wrote the note?"

"I can't tell you yet. The person who wrote it wishes to remain unknown for the present. But I believe that Lovel met Milly and killed her because she would not marry him. Mind you," continued Herne, energetically, "I have no proof of this; but I mean to obtain proof in order to hang Lovel and save you."

"I'm afraid I'm past saving," sighed Lester. "Even Drek believes me to be guilty, and, as I cannot recall the events of the night, I dare not swear that I am innocent. Oh, God! that I should be in such a position!



ignorant of my own acts; and all on account of that accursed drink! I am rightly punished for my vice."

Herne said nothing, for the present was no time for reproaches, but, taking Lester by the arm, he led him into the room where the jury were seated. Already the proceedings had begun, and the witnesses summoned by Inspector Drek were giving evidence. Mr. Chaskin was called first, and deposed that after evening service on Sunday he had been summoned to a house on the other side of the common to pray with a dying man. He returned to Barnstead by the short way of the Winding Lane, and on entering the wood he had stumbled over a body which was lying in the roadway near the stile. Thinking that she had fainted—for by the touch of the garments and the faint glimmer of the moonlight he perceived that the deceased was a woman—he lighted a match to see who she was, and what was the matter with her. Then he recognised the face of Millicent Lester, and that she was dead. There was a wound in the back of the head. The body was lying face downward, and he had to turn it over in order to perceive the features. At once he went on to The Herne Arms and roused up four or five men. These returned with him to the stile and carried the body to the house of Dr. Lester, whence it was removed subsequently to the inn for the inquest. Mr. Chaskin said he heard no shot, and that he had seen no one about either on the common or in the wood. It was about eleven, or a little after, when he discovered the body. He had no idea as to who could have killed the deceased.

The next witness was Dr. Rollin, the rival to Lester

in Barnstead, and the medical man who had examined the body. He deposed that he had made the examination on Monday morning. The deceased had been shot from behind, and the bullet had passed right through the brain. It had entered a little above the nape of the neck, and had come out on one side of the nose. Death must have been instantaneous. He examined the body at nine o'clock on Monday morning; and from its condition he could state that death must have taken place between eight and nine of the previous night; twelve hours, more or less, elapsed, as he believed, between the death and the examination.

Inspector Drek stated that he had been called to Barnstead from Marborough by the information that Millicent Lester had been murdered. He came at once to the house of the deceased. She had died from the effects of a pistol shot, as Dr. Rollin had stated. He had examined the spot where the body had been found, but could discover no evidence there likely to lead to the identification of the criminal. The pistol could not be found; and as the bullet had passed right through the head of the deceased it could not be found either. The spot where the body was discovered was of a deep-red clay, somewhat softened by recent rain. There were many footmarks about, but these were probably those of the bearers who had brought home the body.

Iris Link, on being sworn, declared that the deceased had said nothing to her about going to the Winding Lane on that night. She (deceased) had left St. Dunstan's Church during the service and had not been seen alive since leaving. Witness did not know

why deceased had left. She knew that the dead girl was in the habit of meeting Mr. Lucas Lovel, but did not know for certain if she had met him on that night. Still, she suspected, as deceased had not come home that such a meeting might have taken place. The body of deceased was brought home shortly after midnight on Sunday night. She had no idea who had killed deceased, nor had any knowledge of the motive for the crime.

Mr. Mexton watched the face and listened to the voice of Iris as she made this last statement, for he recalled how she had asked him not to seek for the assassin. For this reason he believed that she knew who had killed Milly, and for some reason—of which he was naturally ignorant—she desired to screen the guilty person. It struck him that she might betray herself while under examination, but in this he was wrong. Without a change of expression, in a firm voice she denied all knowledge of the possible murderer. After this final assertion she stepped down and gave place to Lucas Lovel.

This young man, who was pale but composed, stated that he had not met Milly Lester on the fatal night. He had intended to do so, but meeting with Gran Jimboy he had gone with her to her tent on the other side of the common, and had not returned to The Herne Arms, where he resided, till ten o'clock. He had walked over by the road, and had not taken the short cut through the woods. He swore that he had not been in the Winding Lane on Sunday night.

Gran Jimboy was summoned by Lovel to corroborate this evidence. The old gipsy stated that she had

met Lucas at eight o'clock, immediately after service in St. Dunstan's Church, and had induced him to come to her tent to hear some information which nearly concerned him. The information was private, and had nothing to do with the murder. Lovel, said the woman, had stayed with her till nearly ten o'clock, and then had walked back to the village by the high road. She knew this, as she had gone part of the way with him.

Thus, by the evidence of Gran Jimboy, an alibi in favour of Lovel was clearly proved; and he was exonerated from any complicity in the crime. Still, Herne did not believe the evidence, as Mexton could see by the mocking smile on his lips. However, he made no attempt to speak, and the proceedings continued.

Eliza, the servant of Dr. Lester, was the next witness, and she told her story with shrill volubility. For the moment she was the most important person in the room, as on her evidence was based the charge which was known to be made against Dr. Lester. Eliza knew that her master would be arrested on the statements she could make against him, and relished the situation exceedingly. She had no idea of the cruelty of her feelings towards the man whose bread she had eaten.

Eliza stated, with many airs and graces, that she was the domestic servant of Dr. Lester, and had been in this situation for some years. Her master was in the habit of getting drunk two or three times in the week; when in this condition, he always went about with a loaded revolver, so that the inmates of the

house were in peril of their lives. Dr. Lester had been delighted by the engagement of the deceased to Mr. Herne; and he was angry at the meeting of Miss Lester with Mr. Lovel. Eliza knew that they met, as it was common gossip. On the night of the murder Miss Lester and Miss Link went to church, while the doctor remained at home drinking.

Miss Milly did not return; but Miss Iris did, in the company of Mrs. Drass. When Mrs. Drass departed, Eliza heard high words between the doctor and Miss Link relative to the meetings of the deceased with Mr. Lovel. Afterwards Miss Iris went out to seek Miss Milly, whom she thought was with Mr. Lovel; but Eliza did not know if this were so. Dr. Lester continued drinking, and, fearing lest he should cause trouble, witness watched the door of the consulting-room. Shortly after half-past eight Dr. Lester came out, holding a pistol in his hand; he was mad with drink, and cried out about his daughter and Lovel. Then he rushed out, and witness thought he intended murder. He did not come home till seven in the morning, and then he had no pistol, but his clothes were daubed with red mud, such as is found in the Winding Lane. He began to drink again; but before doing so he changed his clothes. Witness swore that he went out with the intention of killing his daughter, but she did not think he did it deliberately, as he was mad with drink.

Dr. Lester was then called to refute this evidence if he was able. He stated that he had gone out as Eliza described, and with a pistol. He wished to kill Lovel, but he did not know what he said. He did not re-

member what he did or where he went after leaving the house; but he had an indistinct recollection of meeting someone—man or woman he could not say. His pistol was gone when he returned home at seven in the morning, but he did not know where he lost it. Also his clothes were covered with red mud, so it was possible he might have wandered into the Winding Lane, and have fallen in the moist clay. But he recollected nothing. He had no intention of harming his daughter, as he loved her too much.

Iris Link, recalled, said that Dr. Lester was in the habit of carrying about a loaded revolver when drunk. She did not know if he took it out on the Sunday night, but it was not in its case the next day. She stated also that she heard a shot fired at nine o'clock, when she was standing in the shadow of St. Dunstan's Church. She had never heard Dr. Lester threaten his daughter; but he was certainly very irate at the behaviour of Mr. Lovel.

This was all the evidence which had been collected by Drek; and it certainly was against Lester. His own testimony rather inculpated than exonerated him; and from the faces of the jury Paul saw that they inclined to believe Lester guilty. Mexton himself could not make up his mind; appearances pointed to the perpetration of the crime by Dr. Lester when in a state of intoxication; but it was possible that he might be innocent after all. Still, how his innocence was to be proved it was difficult to say.

"Herne might do it," thought Paul, as he took down the evidence, "for he seems to believe Lovel guilty, although Gran Jimboy's statement goes to clear him.

Also Herne knows something in connection with that feather which he picked up. I wonder what that odd-coloured feather has to do with the matter, and whether it could prove the guilt of some person of whom at present we know nothing?"

There was no answer to this question, and Herne made no sign of making any statement about the feather in favour of Lester. He stood quite still, and listened to the summing-up of the coroner—a summing-up which was dead against Lester. The coroner declared that Lester must have been in the Winding Lane on that night, else he could not have got the red clay on his clothes. The question was whether he was there after or before nine o'clock, the hour when, according to Miss Link's evidence, the fatal shot was fired. The coroner was inclined to think that Lester went straight from his own house to the Winding Lane, knowing that was the spot in which his daughter usually met Lovel; and there, finding his daughter waiting for Lovel—who was then in the tent of Gran Jimboy—had fired and killed her. Perhaps he would have killed Lovel had he been present, but in his absence he vented his rage on the deceased. The crime, however, was committed while Lester was drunk, and therefore he was not responsible for his actions.

The result of this speech was that the jury—already prejudiced—found Lester guilty; and immediately the wretched father was arrested by Inspector Drek.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE PROPHECY AGAIN.

WHEN the inquest was over, and Dr. Lester had departed for Marborough gaol under the escort of Inspector Drek, the young journalist remained standing thoughtfully in the square before the inn. Nobody was surprised at the verdict, and everyone—as Paul could hear asserted on all sides—believed that Dr. Lester had murdered his own daughter while in a state of frenzy induced by intoxication. But Mexton had his doubts about the matter, principally on account of the words spoken by Iris when she wished him to cease from searching for the assassin. He wished to question her as to what she meant; and implore her, if she knew the truth, to reveal it and save her unfortunate stepfather. While he was considering the advisability of following Iris to Poverty Villa, he felt a touch on his arm. It was Eliza, and her face was grave.

“I want to speak t’ you, sir, if y’ don’t mind,” she said quietly, with an entire absence of her former self-importance; “but not here; I want t’ speak you—alone.”

“Why? Is anything wrong?”



"I think so, Mr. Mexton—and with Miss Iris."

"Miss Iris?" repeated Paul, glancing round.  
"Where is she?"

"She's gone home. You follow her, sir, and ask her a question."

"What kind of question?" demanded Paul, startled by this hint.

Eliza drew Mexton to one side, until they were both out of earshot of the scattered groups, and bent forward to whisper in his ear, "Ask her why she went out after they brought home the corpse of Miss Milly?" she said; and before Paul could make any comment on this remark, she laid her finger on her mouth, and walked away.

At first Paul intended to follow her, and demand an explanation; but on consideration he deemed it best to take her advice, and ask the question directly of Iris herself. More would be learnt by thus going to the fountain-head. Eliza evidently suspected something; and, afraid to question Iris directly, had hinted her suspicions to Paul that he might do so. With his usual promptitude Mexton sent over his notes on the trial by special messenger to the editor of the "Tory Times" at Marborough; and set forth at a brisk walk to Poverty Villa. He believed firmly at the moment that the saving of Dr. Lester from suffering unjustly lay in the hands of his step-daughter.

As he passed along the street towards the desolate house in which the poor girl was waiting, he was surprised to meet with Herne, and still more surprised when Herne stopped to speak; for the man was not over-friendly towards him.

"What do you think of the verdict?" asked the squire abruptly.

"It seems just enough, going by the evidence," replied Mexton cautiously.

"No doubt. This is one of those cases in which circumstantial evidence accumulates to hang an innocent man."

"You believe Dr. Lester to be innocent?"

"I do—as surely as I believe Lovel to be guilty."

"My dear sir!" protested the journalist. "Lovel proved his innocence by an alibi."

"No doubt; on the evidence of that old witch Mother Jimboy. Bah! a made-up plot!"

"I don't think so, Herne. Why should Mother Jimboy assist Lovel?"

"Why?" repeated the squire—"because blood is thicker than water; and, I told you the other day, Lovel has got gipsy blood in his veins."

"Who told you so?"

"The lady at whose name you blushed when I mentioned it in the Winding Lane."

"Catinka?" said Paul, blushing again.

"Yes; Catinka, the violinist. Lovel knows her, and told her that his mother was Rômany, perhaps the daughter of Gran Jimboy—who knows? That is why the old woman lied."

"Because Lovel is her grandson?"

"No, no; I am not sure of that; but because Lovel is a half-gipsy. But in spite of the alibi I believe he is guilty. I'll prove his guilt and hang him!"

"Why do you hate him so, Herne?"

"Because he led that poor girl to her death. I

wished to save the soul of Milly; but it is lost, and Lovel is the cause. Besides, I believe it is my duty to succor the afflicted, and of the afflicted Dr. Lester is one. An innocent man shall not die on the scaffold if I can help it. God forbid! I'll save Lester, and hang Lovel. The end of this tragedy has not yet come, Mexton."

"But if you——"

Herne waved his hand and interrupted Mexton.

"I can't waste any more time discussing the matter," he said, retreating. "I'll see you again when I have proofs to hang Lovel." After which speech he walked rapidly away, without the courtesy of an adieu.

"Mad!" said Paul to himself, and resumed his interrupted journey towards Poverty Villa. In his own heart the young man believed that Herne was insane; his fanaticism in religion was a proof of an ill-balanced mind; and now this furious hatred of Lovel—just enough, in the face of Lovel's attentions to Milly in wilful disregard of the engagement with Herne—threatened to rob him of all his self-control. Failing to fasten the crime on Lovel, and it seemed impossible to do so, Herne was quite capable of shooting the man in a fit of rage. Knowing that Chaskin had most influence over Darcy, the journalist determined to put him on his guard relative to the squire's hatred of Lovel. But this warning word need not be spoken immediately; and in the meantime Paul was anxious to see Iris.

The door of Poverty Villa was wide open; and the untidy house in its neglected garden looked more desolate than ever. Lester was on his way to Mar-

borough gaol; Milly was lying in her coffin at The Herne Arms; and Eliza had not yet returned. Therefore Paul knew that Iris was alone in the house with a heavy burden of grief to bear. Slipping lightly into the passage, he glanced through the open door of the dining-room, but she was not there. The drawing-room was also empty; so as a last resource he softly opened the door of the consulting-room, and beheld the poor girl seated at the desk with her head bowed on her folded arms. Sobs were shaking her frame, and she looked as though the sorrows of the past week were crushing her to the earth.

"Iris," he said softly, "my poor girl."

With an exclamation she lifted her head, and on seeing Paul rose to her feet hastily, brushing away the tears from her face. Then, with a little gasp, she moved forward with outstretched hands, to greet the only friend who remained to her in the desolation of her life.

"Paul," she said with relief, "oh, my dear, I am glad to see you!"

He led her to a seat, and, taking a chair beside her, pressed her hand warmly. "My dear Iris," said he, "at such a time you need the services of your best friend. Let me be that friend."

"Thank you, Paul," she said faintly. "Oh, this horrible tragedy! Shall I ever get it out of my head?"

"Time will bring comfort, Iris. In the meantime, let me ask what you intend to do now? You cannot remain here."

"No; you are right there. Milly is dead; her father

is in gaol on the charge of having killed her, and I am alone in the world."

"Have you any money?"

"Not one penny. The last money I got from my step-father went to pay last week's bills."

"Then you cannot remain here, as I said before."

"Where am I to go?" asked Iris helplessly.

"To Marborough—to my mother. She told me to ask you."

"How good and kind of her, Paul! I should like—but, oh!" she burst out, "how can I go to Marborough to be pointed out as the relative of a murderer?"

"Wait one moment before you call Dr. Lester by that name, Iris. Are you sure that he is the murderer of Milly?"

"I don't know. I can't say. The verdict at the inquest——"

"Never mind the verdict at the inquest," interposed Paul quickly. "I want to know what you think."

"Why do you want to know what I think?"

"Because I believe you can save an innocent man from being hanged."

"I? No, no! I can do nothing!"

"Iris," said Mexton, taking her hand, "you asked me never to look for the assassin of Milly. Did you do so to save Dr. Lester?"

"No. At that time I did not think that he would be accused."

"Then you suspect someone?"

"I—I have my suspicions," she said, in hesitating tones.

"What are they? To whom do they point?"

"I can't tell you. I am not certain. I may be deceived. Paul!" cried Iris in desperation, "don't ask me. My answer may condemn an innocent person!"

"Your silence acts in the same way, Iris. Dr. Lester is in danger of death, and you know he is innocent."

"He is—he is! I don't believe that he killed Milly. But how should I know the name of the real assassin?"

"Because you saw him on that night."

"I? I was not out on that night—at least, after the body was brought home."

"Iris, why will you lie to me? Eliza saw you leave the house after midnight."

"Eliza! Ah, that wretched girl has brought ruin on us all!"

"Not so—if I can save you. Tell me—did you go out?"

"Wait—wait! I'll answer in a moment. Give me time."

She rose to her feet, and, with clasped hands, walked twice or thrice up and down the room. Evidently she was considering what to say, and after some thought she faced round on Paul.

"I shall tell you," she said slowly, "but you will use the knowledge to hunt down the assassin of Milly?"

"Assuredly! I wish to save Dr. Lester from suffering an unjust death."

"So do I, so do I! But, oh!"—she struck her hand together—"was ever a woman placed in such a position? If I could only speak!"

"You must," said Paul determinedly, "or else have

your step-father's death at your door. Come, Iris, do you know the name of the assassin?"

"No, but I suspect——"

"Suspect whom?"

"Lucas Lovel."

Mexton rose from his seat in astonishment. "Do you believe him guilty, as Herne does?"

"Does Mr. Herne believe in his guilt?" asked Iris quickly.

"So thoroughly that he intends to bring Lovel to the scaffold."

"He will never succeed in doing so," cried the girl involuntarily.

"Why not?"

"He will not be able to obtain any evidence."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Mexton drily. "Herne is a fanatic; he is clever; he is extremely pertinacious; and he hates Lovel like poison."

"For all that, I do not believe he will be able to accumulate sufficient evidence to get Mr. Lovel arrested. Besides, he has a clever foe, who will defend Mr. Lovel."

"A foe?" said Paul, puzzled—"and the name of the foe?"

"Mother Jimboy."

"What! that old fool! How can she defend Lovel?"

"She did so to-day by that alibi. She will do so again, you may be sure."

"What reason have you to believe that Mrs. Jimboy is implicated in the case?"

Iris thought for a moment. "On the day before Milly was killed," she said, slowly, "she and Mr. Lovel

met with Gran Jimboy, who prophesied by palmistry that Milly would die a violent death."

"You don't say so! Go on."

"Well, Milly did perish by violence the next night. I truly believe that she met Lovel in the Winding Lane, and that he killed her."

"Why should he kill her? He loved her."

"He did—so much that he killed her rather than that Mr. Herne should marry her. I tell you, Paul, that Mr. Lucas is a man of violent passions, and I believe he was egged on by Mother Jimboy to the murder."

"Why should Mother Jimboy desire Milly's death?"

"I don't know; no more than I can guess why she provided that lying alibi. I am sure that Lovel shot Milly, and then went across the common to Mother Jimboy's tent so as to appear innocent."

"But why do you believe all this?"

"Because of the prophecy which was fulfilled; because of the unexplained association of Mother Jimboy and Lovel, and because I saw Lovel when I went out after midnight."

"You saw Lovel?" said Paul, incredulously.

"Yes; I fancied that Dr. Lester might have killed Milly; and to save him I went to look for him. I could not find him on the fatal spot, but there was a man there who ran away when he heard my approach. I saw his face in the moonlight. He was Mr. Lovel."



## CHAPTER XI.

### BRENT SPEAKS OUT.

"It was Mr. Lovel," repeated Iris; "and if he was not concerned in the murder, what was he doing at midnight on the very spot where it occurred?"

"He may have been there after twelve o'clock," said Paul; "but to inculcate him you must prove that he met Milly between eight and nine."

"I can't prove it; no one can prove it."

"I am not sure of that," replied Paul, with sudden recollection; "there is a man called Brent who was in the Winding Lane on that night, and about that time. I'll see him."

Iris shook her head. "If Brent had known anything he would have come forward at the inquest."

"No doubt—if he had not been bribed."

"What makes you think that Brent has been bribed?" asked Iris, in surprise.

"I do not think so; but Herne insists upon it."

"Mr. Herne!" said Iris, in a low voice, and with a flush—"he believes Lovel guilty also?"

"Yes—and without your grounds for belief. Also, he declares that Lovel bribed Brent to hold his tongue."

"Does Mr. Herne think that Brent saw the murder committed?"

"Oh, no! but he thinks that Brent saw Lovel with Milly."

"I am certain Milly, poor girl, was with Lovel on that night, and I believe he killed her."

There was a few minutes' silence, and then Paul turned quickly towards Iris. "I want to ask you a rather rude question," said he, awkwardly.

"What is it?"

"You won't be angry?"

"I am long past feeling anger after what I have gone through," said Iris, sadly. "What is it you wish to know, friend?"

"You asked me not to search for the assassin of Milly; and now I find that you believe the assassin to be Lovel. Are you in love with the man, that you sought to screen him?"

"In love with Mr. Lovel!" cried Iris, indignantly. "Not I! I despise him too much! A man who would act as he has done with Milly, knowing that she was engaged to Herne, is not worthy of a woman's love! No; I do not love, or even respect, Mr. Lovel."

"Then why do you seek to screen him?"

Iris rose to her feet with a cold look. "I cannot answer that question now. I had my reasons for acting as I did."

"What do you mean?" asked Mexton, rising in his turn. "I don't understand you."

"If I told you my reasons, you would understand still less," said Iris bitterly. "I do not understand my-

self. But don't ask me any more questions, Paul. I have told you all I know."

"All!" said Mexton, with emphasis, his eyes searching her face.

"All I can tell you now, at all events," she replied, obstinately.

After this last remark Mexton was satisfied that Iris, for reasons of her own which he could not guess, had not confessed all she knew. Yet as he was unaware of her motives for this reserve, he did not think it wise to press his questions. Better, he thought, to accept her refusal for the moment, and question her on some future occasion, when she might be more inclined to take him into her confidence. Moreover, by examining Brent, and forcing him into confession, he might get at her knowledge without the necessity of procuring it through herself. The matter thus settled in his own mind, Paul discarded the subject of the murder, and addressed himself to the question of Miss Link's position.

"You will accept my mother's offer, I suppose?" said he, quietly. "At all events you will stay with her until after the trial of your stepfather?"

Iris winced. "I do not care about facing Marborough gossip," she said; "but I think it best to stay with Mrs. Mexton, as I am afraid to remain here alone. I shall go over to Marborough by the six o'clock coach. Eliza can stay here in charge of the house."

"Very good, Iris. I shall meet you at six o'clock at The Herne Arms and take you over."

"And in the meantime—?"

"I intend to find out Brent, and force him to confess the truth."

This arrangement having been come to, Paul left Poverty Villa, and went off in the direction of the village. On his way towards the market-place, where he expected to find Brent—for it was market-day in Barnstead, and the town was full of farmers and labourers—Mexton remembered that the ploughman had confessed to being with one Jane Bilway in the Winding Lane. If this were so, the woman must have seen as much as the man; and if she had not been bribed also, it was more likely that he would be able to extract the truth from her. Mexton knew most people, high and low, in Barnstead, amongst these Jane Bilway, who was a servant at The Chequers, a little public-house on the outskirts of the village. Thither he turned his steps to see what he could learn from the woman.

Jane was a broad, squat wench with a healthy red face and dull eyes. She had about as much intelligence as a cow, and was only useful in doing rough work and common drudgery. She was, at the moment of Paul's arrival, cleaning the front windows of The Chequers, and recognised him with a friendly grin. At once Mexton began to ask her questions on the subject which was uppermost in his mind.

"Jane," he said, quietly, "you are to marry Giles Brent, they say?"

"Yes, Mr. Mexton. We've bin keepin' company since Christmas."

"You see him occasionally?"

"Most ivery day. He comes here a lot; he's inside

now, havin' a wet," said Jane, pointing to the window of the tap-room.

This was better news than Paul expected, for it gave him the chance of an immediate conversation with Brent. But before entering the public-house, he pursued his plan of gaining information from Jane.

"Were you walking with him on the night Miss Lester was killed?"

"I were," replied Miss Bilway, frankly. "We went to the Methody Chapel together."

"Where did you meet him?"

"Just by the church, sir. We heard the shot fired when the bell was ringing."

"But you were with him in the Winding Lane?"

Jane shook her head emphatically. "No, I wasn't, sir," she denied. "I couldn't git away in time to go there. I wasn't in the lane on that night."

"Oh!" Paul noted that Brent had been telling a lie. "You met Brent by St. Dunstan's Church at nine o'clock, and went to the Methodist Chapel?"

"Yes, I did. And I 'eard the shot fired, but I thought it was nothin', though Giles he wanted to go back."

"You didn't see Miss Lester on that night?"

"No, sir; but I see Miss Iris, her sister, by the church at nine. She must 'ave heard the shot, too."

"I daresay," replied Paul, with assumed carelessness. "Well, Jane, here's a sovereign to buy yourself a wedding-present."

"Thank you, sir," said Jane, slipping the coin into her pocket. "I wants all I can git, though to be sure Giles ain't badly off for money."

"Oh, he has money, has he?" said Mexton, recollecting Herne's idea of the bribery; "a few shillings, no doubt?"

"A good few shillings, sir! Five pounds of 'em! We're goin' to spend 'em on the weddin'. Giles saved up the money from his wages. He's a good fellow, is Giles, sir."

"I'm sure he is; I hope he'll make you a good husband."

"I'll see to that!" replied Miss Bilway, grimly, and she went on cleaning the windows.

Paul laughed as he entered the tap-room, and thought of the ingenious Mr. Brent's device for accounting for his possession of the money. He was well known to be a thriftless wastrel, who spent most of his earnings in strong ale; and was as likely to save five pounds as he was to do an honest day's work. No one but simple Jane Bilway, blinded by love, would have believed so improbable a story. There was now no doubt in Paul's mind that the theory of Herne was correct. Lovel and Milly had met in the Winding Lane between eight and nine o'clock on the night of the murder, and had been seen by Brent as he was on his way to meet Jane near the church. Lest he should tell Herne of the meeting Lovel had bribed him with the five pounds.

"Though it is a large sum for a man like Lovel to give," thought Paul; "he is not well off, and would not part with so much money unless he was forced to. I hope the five pounds was not given to conceal a worse affair than a simple meeting. However, I'll

play a game of bluff with Brent, and wring the truth, whatever it may be, out of him."

Brent, who was a huge, bull-headed fellow with a sulky face, sat alone in the tap-room with a mug of ale before him. He touched his hat to Paul, whom he recognised, and looked puzzled for the moment at the sight of a gentleman in a low-class public-house, which was usually patronised by himself and those of his class.

"Well, Brent," said Paul, in a cheerful voice, "how are you? All right—eh? I have just come to have a few moments of conversation with you."

Brent took his pipe from his lips, and gave a sulky growl. "What about, sir?"

"I'll tell you in good time," replied Paul, taking a chair, and selecting a cigarette from his case. "In the meantime, I am thirsty, and wish to drink. You'll have some ale with me?"

"I'd 'ave ale wi' anyone," said Brent, suspiciously; "but I don't know, sir, what the likes o' you wants with the likes o' me."

"We'll come to that soon," said Mexton, and hammered on the table. "Two tankards of bitter," he added to the slip-slop landlady, who entered with a deferential smile.

The liquor was soon brought, and after a deep draught Paul lighted his cigarette, and looked closely at the ploughman. Brent took a drink also, and tried to appear at ease, although he was visibly disturbed by the scrutiny of his visitor. Having reduced him to a doubtful frame of mind, Mexton addressed himself to the matter in hand.

He knew the manner of the man he had to do with, and that it would not be an easy matter to extract information from such a sulky brute. Threats also would avail little, as Brent was one of these pig-headed men, who begin by denying, and go on doing so in the face of the clearest evidence with incredible obstinacy. The sole chance of getting at the truth was to assume that Lovel had confessed the bribery to him—that is, to Paul Mexton—and had sent him on an errand connected therewith to Brent. This attitude necessitated the telling of a few lies; but Mexton was quite prepared to tell them. He was cool-headed and pertinacious, and not the man to stick at a trifle for the gaining of his own ends.

"I have come to you from Mr. Lovel," said Paul, slowly.

Brent's jaw dropped. "What's the likes of him want with the likes of me?" he said.

"A little decency, in the first place," replied Mexton. "You promised to hold your tongue about the meeting of Mr. Lovel and Miss Lester on the night of the murder."

"How d'ye know they met?" asked Brent, with dogged suspicion.

"Mr. Lovel told me. Do you think I would know if he had not?—or that I would be aware that he paid you five pounds to hold your tongue?"

Brent, whose brain worked slowly, fell into the trap at once. Unless Lovel had spoken, as Mexton declared, he did not think Paul could have come by such exact information; the more particularly as the precise amount of the bribe was mentioned. It never



occurred to Brent at the moment that Jane had innocently betrayed him.

"Well, I've earned the money all right, ain't I?" he growled.

"Indeed you have done no such thing!" replied Mexton. "You have been talking about the meeting."

"I swear I ain't!" cried Brent, bringing down his huge fist on the table. "I cud 'ave talked about it when they sat on the corpse; but I didn't. I stayed here and shut up. I never told a single soul as I seed Mr. Lovel and Miss Milly walking in the Winding Lane on that night."

This was quite enough. Herne had been right and Lovel had met Milly by appointment on the fatal night. Therefore the alibi proved by Mother Jimboy was a deception to defeat the ends of justice; and Lovel was in league with the gipsy. Paul began to believe that he might have killed Milly after all; but he resolved to question Brent further before coming to so important a conclusion.

"Well, I daresay Mr. Lovel was mistaken," said Paul, genially; "it would be dangerous for him were it known that he met Miss Lester on that night."

"I don't see it!" growled Brent.

"I do; and so does Mr. Lovel; that is why he asked me to see if you had kept silence. If it was known that Mr. Lovel was in the Winding Lane on that night, he might be accused of the murder."

"Let 'em accuse!" said Brent, grimly, "they can't prove he killed the gal. And I knows he didn't, else I'd not held my tongue. If he was a murderer, I'd get him hanged for all his five pounds!"

"Then you are certain Mr. Lovel is innocent?"

"Yes, I am."

"And you know who is guilty?"

"I ain't sure of that," replied Brent, after a pause; "but I saw her creeping after Mr. Lovel and the gal, and when I heard the shot, I ses: 'She's done it!'"

"She? Who?" asked Paul, much excited.

"Why, Miss Clyde, o' Clyde's Farm. Who else?" replied Brent, coolly.

## CHAPTER XII.

### A STARTLING PIECE OF EVIDENCE.

"Miss CLYDE!" said Paul, staring at his informant; "but what was she doing in the Winding Lane at so late an hour?"

"Watchin' Miss Lester, of course, sir!"

"Why? For what reason?"

Brent laughed in a coarse manner, and there was a leer on his face as he replied to this question. "Don't y' know, sir, Miss Clyde's sweet on Mr. Lovel, and she 'ated Miss Lester like pisin?"

"Are you sure?"

"Sure?" returned Brent, with contempt—"why, ain't I bin ploughman on Clyde's Farm for years? an' ain't I 'eard arl the talk o' the maids? 'Tis well known theer as Miss Clyde 'ud give 'er ears to be Missus Lovel!"

"And you think she killed Miss Lester out of jealousy?"

"I'm sure she did, sir. Wot was she doin' in th' lane creepin' arter them? Why wasn't she 'ome at the Farm? Oh, no, sir; she did it, for I knows the kin' of temper she 'as! Mad bulls is nothin' to it!"

"Then Dr. Lester is innocent!" said Paul, half to himself.

"Niver thowt he were guilty," returned Brent, drily.

"Then why didn't you come forward at the inquest and confess all this, so as to save an innocent man from arrest?"

Brent reared himself to a giant height, and he laid down his pipe on the table. "Whoy didn't I," he thundered—"cause I wished t' be honourable for that there money! If I'd said I seed Miss Clyde, I'd have had to say why she wos theer, wouldn't I? and cud I 'ave said she were watchin' Mr. Lovel and the gal when the five pounds were given to me to 'old my tongue? It was either tell arl or shut up," concluded Brent, dropping back into his seat, "so I shut up."

Paul nodded. "It was the only thing you could do," he said, musingly; "but I must see Miss Clyde and get the truth out of her."

"An' y' mus' see Mr. Lovel," said Brent, heavily. "I ain't goin' to let the doctor be strung oop. Let Mr. Lovel git away t' Americy, an' then I'll tell arl I've told you about Miss Clyde and Mr. Lovel, an' th' perlice will let t' doctor out o' gaol."

"No doubt," said Mexton, rising. "And in the meantime, Brent, you had better hold your tongue until I give you leave to speak."

"I shan't speak till Mr. Lovel ses 'es I can," said Brent, doggedly.

"I'll see Mr. Lovel about that, Brent. In the meantime, as I said before, hold your tongue. If Inspector Drek knew what you have done you would get into trouble."

"Shan't, sir, if y' don't tell him!"

"I don't intend to tell him," rejoined Paul, coldly.

"I'll thrash out this matter for myself. If Miss Clyde killed that poor girl, she must suffer for her crime."

"I 'ope they'll string 'er oop!" said Brent, vindictively. "I 'ate 'er; she turned me off wi'oot a character."

Paul shrugged his shoulders at this last speech, which betrayed the motive for Brent's accusation, and went away from the inn. It was now growing late, and he had to return to his duties in Marborough. There was no time to ride out two miles and see Miss Clyde; nor, if there had been, would Paul have sought an interview so soon after the conversation with Brent. He wished for a quiet time to consider all that had been told to him; to marshal his facts and to draw deductions therefrom. The truth is, Mexton was becoming bewildered by the sudden shifting of the blame from one person to another. At first, on the face of the circumstantial evidence supplied by Eliza, it seemed that Dr. Lester was guilty; and even after the sifting of such evidence by coroner and jury, it had been found strong enough to imprison him pending a more extended trial. Then, by the belief of Herne regarding the bribery—which was afterwards admitted by Brent—and by the declaration of Iris, it appeared that Lovel had committed the crime. Now came the ploughman, who positively asserted that Miss Clyde had killed Milly. Which one of the three witnesses was to be believed? which of the three accused was to be deemed guilty? Paul could not say.

"He quite admitted that Miss Clyde, in a moment of jealousy at seeing Lovel with her rival, might have given way to the strong temper which she was known to possess. But it was incredible that she had gone to

the Winding Lane with a pistol to designedly murder the girl. The question was: Where had she obtained the weapon wherewith to commit the crime? No doubt she had seen Lovel follow Milly into the lane, and had come after him. That was clear enough; but it did not account for Miss Clyde's possession of a pistol, without which she could not have shot the girl. On the whole, Paul doubted the story of Brent, which was doubtless dictated by a feeling of hatred against the woman who had dismissed him from her employment. By the time he reached Marborough, the journalist had come to the conclusion that Miss Clyde would be able to refute the accusation; and he determined to give her the chance of doing so next day at a personal interview. Paul believed that she would prove her own innocence, and might also offer from her own knowledge some solution of the mystery.

On arriving at his home Paul found that Iris had preceded him, and was seated in the tiny drawing-room with Mrs. Mexton. The widow—for Paul's father had long since departed this life—was a placid, motherly-looking woman, whose mission in life seemed to be the task of comforting the afflicted. In this mission she was now engaged with Iris, and from the more composed looks of the girl it would seem that she had succeeded.

"Well," said Iris, when he made his appearance, "did you find Brent?"

"Yes—and what is more, I made him speak out."

"Did he give you any useful information?"

"He did; so useful that I hope to prove the inno-

cence of Dr. Lester, and secure the arrest of the real murderer."

"Lucas Lovel?"

"No. According to Brent, that gentleman is innocent."

"I told you so, Iris," interjected Mrs. Mexton mildly. "I am sure Mr. Lovel is too much a gentleman to commit so terrible a crime."

"I don't think good birth or good breeding have much to do with the prevention of crime," replied Iris disdainfully; "there is criminality amongst the upper classes, as in the lower, only they sin in a more refined manner. But this is beside the question. What I wish to know is: If Mr. Lovel is not guilty—which I beg leave to doubt—who is?"

"What would you say to Miss Clyde?"

"I should laugh."

"And I," said Mrs. Mexton energetically, "would be utterly disinclined to believe that a Christian gentlewoman would fall to such a depth of degradation."

"Christian gentlewomen, like all others of their sex, are amenable to jealousy," declared Paul, grimly.

"Jealousy!" repeated Iris—"and Miss Clyde was jealous?"

"So Brent says. She loves Lucas Lovel and hated your sister."

"Does Brent say she committed the crime on that motive?"

"Yes; he saw her following the pair in the lane on that night."

"Then Lovel did meet Milly?"

"He did."

"And Mr. Lovel bribed him to hold his tongue?"

"Precisely," assented Paul—"and with a five-pound note."

"Then I tell you what," said Iris, coolly—"Mr. Lovel paid Brent also to accuse Miss Clydel!"

"H'm! It's not improbable," said Mexton, pulling his moustache. "I am more inclined to believe in the guilt of Lovel than in that of Miss Clyde. But I'll see her to-morrow and ask her for an explanation."

"She won't give it."

"In that case I'll tell Drek, and he'll force her to speak."

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" sighed Mrs. Mexton. "It is truly terrible to think of the way in which we have been brought into contact with crime! And poor Dr. Lester in gaol!"

"He won't be in goal long," said Paul, with a satisfied nod.

"You are going to prove his innocence?" cried Iris, anxiously.

"I am; but I don't intend to leave him in prison until I do so. To-morrow I'll get bail for him, and he will be a free man—at all events till his trial."

"It is very good of you, Paul," said Iris, gratefully; and Mrs. Mexton endorsed the statement with a nod of her head. She was a simple and pious old woman, but not quite the company for two young and ardent people. Her views on the matter of the murder were singularly crude; and the point she dwelt on most was that Lester's loss and arrest were a judgment on him for his long indulgence in the drinking vice. But,



knowing him as she had done, the most part of his life, she did not believe he was guilty, and stated this opinion to Iris, who was much comforted thereby.

"I do not love Dr. Lester," she confessed, "and I never approved of my mother's second marriage. All the same, I should be terribly sorry to see him hanged."

"Particularly for a crime of which he is guiltless," said Paul. "By the way, Iris, you will have to return to Barnstead to-morrow for the funeral."

"We are both going over," said Mrs. Mexton, patting the head of Iris. "Poor Milly!"

And then they fell to talking about Milly and her many good qualities; also about her beauty and charm. No mention was made of her faults, seeing that she was dead, and that it is not well to speak evil of those who have gone. Mrs. Mexton exalted Milly into a martyr, and Iris endorsed the canonisation with tears. In the midst of this glorification Paul slipped out and went to the office of the "Tory Times" for a long night's work. He arrived back in the small hours of the morning when Iris had retired; and left for Barnstead after eight o'clock, before she was up. Therefore he did not see her again till the afternoon, when he met her in Barnstead Cemetery at the funeral of her unfortunate half-sister.

As usual, Paul rode over to Barnstead. Independent of his journalistic earnings he had a small income, and it did not cost much to keep a horse in the country. Riding was a great passion with the young man; and he always declared that he thought better when in the saddle than in the study. On this perfect sum-

mer morning, however, he was less occupied with fiction than with real life. The murder case absorbed his every thought, and he recognised that the mystery of Milly's case could hardly have been surpassed in the detective novel of the day. He was determined to discover who had killed the girl; and passed rapidly through Barnstead towards Clyde's Farm in order to see the lady, and ascertain what amount of truth there was in Brent's story.

The residence of Miss Clyde was a long, low house, with whitewashed walls and a thatched roof, eminently picturesque, but not at all practical. There was a homely flower-garden before it, filled with marigolds, sweet-williams, southernwood and such-like Old English flowers; these being the peculiar care of Mrs. Drass, who blended gossip with horticulture. When Paul rode up to the gate, she was pottering about with a trowel in her hand, and came to the gate to meet him: but keen-eyed Paul Mexton noted that she did not seem overpleased at his visit.

"This is a surprise, Mr. Mexton!" said she, as he alighted from his horse, and tied the reins to the gate-post. "It is rarely that you honour us with a visit—especially at so early an hour."

"I must apologise for the hour," said Paul, entering the house, conducted by the ex-governess, "but I have to see Miss Clyde on important business."

"About what?" asked Mrs. Drass sharply.

"Pardon me, dear madam," replied Paul, thwarting this curiosity with great blandness, "but I shall explain that to Miss Clyde herself."

Mrs. Drass muttered something which Paul could

not hear, and her usually florid face was pale, as she preceded him into the dining-room, where Miss Clyde sat at breakfast. That lady looked cold and composed and masculine as usual; but she could not suppress a start at the sight of Paul.

"So you want to see me on business, Mr. Mexton?" she said, when he had explained himself. "Very good. Come into my study, and we will not be disturbed."

"Can I come also, Selina?" said Mrs. Drass, who was extremely curious.

"Not just now," answered Miss Clyde; "later on I shall send for you."

So Mrs. Drass went back to her flowers with an unsatisfied curiosity, while Paul and Miss Clyde repaired to the room, which the latter dignified with the name of her study. In truth, it was more of a bachelor's den than the apartment of a spinster lady; and its furnishing was an excellent proof of the simplicity of its owner's character. Miss Clyde sat down before the desk, which fronted the window, and pointing out a seat to Paul, waited to hear what he had to say. Knowing her direct and outspoken way of going about things, Paul went directly to the point.

"I have come to see you about this murder, Miss Clyde," he said, looking at her significantly.

"I expected as much," she replied quietly. "But what can I tell you about it?"

"As much as you saw in the Winding Lane on that night," said Mexton boldly.

"Who saw me in the lane?"

"Brent; he saw you following Milly and Mr. Lovel. Were you?"

"Yes; I followed them for a purpose."

"To kill Milly," said Paul, wondering at her coolness.

Miss Clyde shook her head, and opening a drawer, produced therefrom a pistol. "I followed them to obtain that revolver," she said, and handed the weapon to Paul.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE DEFENCE OF MISS CLYDE.

It was not to be denied that the conversation between Miss Clyde and the journalist had opened in a highly dramatic fashion. Mexton, prompted by the recollection of Brent's revelation and accusation—had in sufficient plain language accused her of murdering Milly Lester. In answer to this Miss Clyde had placed in his hands a revolver which she admitted having obtained possession of on that fatal night. The unfortunate girl had been shot; Paul asked himself if the crime had been consummated by the weapon which Miss Clyde had produced, and which, in a somewhat dazed fashion, he held in his hand.

"No," said his hostess, reading his thoughts in his face; "Milly was not killed by a shot from that pistol. But she might have been."

"I don't understand what you mean," stammered Paul.

"It is not difficult to understand," rejoined Miss Clyde, shrugging her fine shoulders. "I took that pistol from a would-be murderer."

"Mr. Lovel?"

An angry red flushed the hard face of the woman,

and she made a gesture of contempt for the lack of imagination Paul displayed. "Mr. Lovel, indeed!" she said contemptuously. "He had as much to do with the crime as I had! No; I took that pistol from Dr. Lester."

"Lester! Then he is innocent!"

"Entirely. He should not have been arrested."

"Then why did you not prevent his arrest by producing this revolver at the inquest?"

"Oh, I had my reasons for that," said Miss Clyde, with an emphatic nod; "these I will tell you later. In the meantime, Mr. Mexton, please to assure yourself that the revolver you hold in your hand is actually the property of Dr. Lester. Look at the silver plate on the butt."

Paul did so, and on the small silver oval found the name "R. Lester" engraved in Gothic letters. Nodding in his turn, he replaced the weapon on the desk; and as it was loaded, he deduced from such fact another point in favour of Lester.

"I see there are cartridges in all six barrels!" she said quickly.

"Yes; Dr. Lester did not fire even one barrel; so you see he did not kill his daughter."

"Then who did?"

"My dear Mr. Mexton, I know no more than you do!" said Miss Clyde candidly. "I see that from the evidence of Brent—a rascal whom I discharged from my employment—that you suspect me. Well," she laughed in an ironical manner, "I can clear myself; not only can I do so, but I can prove the innocence of Dr. Lester."

"Will you do so to me?" asked Paul eagerly.

Miss Clyde looked him coolly up and down. "Really, Mr. Mexton, I do not see why I should," was her response; "you do not represent the law."

"Not officially. But Inspector Drek has accepted my assistance."

"Has he? And why have you offered it?"

"Because I wish to save Dr. Lester from being judicially murdered."

"I think that lies in my province rather than in yours," said Miss Clyde, smiling; "but I suppose the real reason that you are acting as an amateur detective lies in the fact that you love Miss Link?"

Paul smiled also. "I can't say that I do," he replied; "we are more like brother and sister than anything else. But I don't deny that I am sorry for her on account of her loss."

"You need not be," retorted Miss Clyde with disdain; "there was no love lost between Milly and Iris; in fact, they disliked one another."

"Oh, I should not say that," protested Paul, shocked by her want of sentiment.

"Aye, but I shall say it! Milly was going to marry Mr. Herne, and Iris was in love with him; quite enough motive there for two women to fight."

"No doubt," rejoined Paul, with significance; "jealousy between women has caused many a crime."

"Is that a hit at me?" asked Miss Clyde, good-humouredly: "because, if it is, it falls short of the mark. You infer that I was jealous of that poor dead girl because Lucas Lovel made love to her."

"Report says so."

"Report says many things that are untrue," retorted Miss Clyde contemptuously; "but in this case the gossips were not altogether wrong. I love Mr. Lovel, as you know very well; as all the countryside knows. Why should I conceal my feelings? I have no one to think of but myself, and I can look after myself very well, I assure you. Lucas—I can call him so to you, Mr. Mexton, as this is a confidential conversation—is a scamp, and a weak-minded fool; but I love him for all that. Queer, isn't it?"

Paul looked at the masculine strength of the woman's face, into her shrewd eyes, and at the firm set of her mouth. "It is queer," he admitted; "you do not look the sort of a woman to be attracted by a wastrel like Lovel."

"Nevertheless I am; by the law of contraries no doubt. Well, I admit that I was jealous of his preference for Milly Lester. Her beauty and fascinations of manner excited my envy; and as she had the whole neighbourhood at her feet, I grudged that she should take my ewe-lamb."

"The whole neighbourhood!" echoed Paul.

"Well, Mr. Herne, Mr. Lovel, and Mr. Chaskin. The pick of the countryside."

"Nonsense! Mr. Chaskin did not love Milly!"

"There you are wrong," rejoined Miss Clyde drily. "He adored her, and only crushed down his passion because of his friendship for Herne. Oh, I know it for a fact. Mrs. Drass found it all out."

"She finds out everything!" said Paul tartly—"just like a social detective."

"She does," assented Miss Clyde coolly; "but she is



not omniscient, else she would know who killed poor Milly. I find Mrs. Drass very useful, I assure you, Mr. Mexton."

"I quite believe it. But to continue your confession."

"Oh, you need not dignify my story by so great a title! I am not in the dock yet, Mr. Mexton! I assure you I shall prove my innocence to you very plainly. Where was I?"

"You were informing me that Mr. Chaskin was in love with poor Milly."

"Ah! that is a side issue. Mr. Lovel was also in love with the unfortunate girl, and I did not approve of his passion, as I wanted him for myself."

"You were jealous?" said Mexton, more plainly-spoken than polite.

"I was," said Miss Clyde calmly; "the most unromantic of women have their vein of sentiment—their passion. Lucas is my passion, and I love him dearly. I was very jealous of his preference for Milly, and I was angry with her for encouraging him. She was engaged to Mr. Herne, and should have remained true to him. On the night of the murder I saw Milly leave during the service; and Mr. Lovel followed the moment it was concluded."

"To meet with Milly?" suggested Paul.

"Yes, I thought so; and I was determined to put a stop to such meetings by giving Milly a good talking to, and threatening to tell Mr. Herne. You need not look at me so severely, Mr. Mexton," continued Miss Clyde, throwing back her head. Milly was behaving badly towards Herne, and even if I had not been in

love with the man she was flirting with. I think, as an older woman, and one who had known her from childhood, I had the right to point out to her how wrongly she was acting."

"No doubt, Miss Clyde; but you chose a bad time for such interference."

"I deny that," said the lady tranquilly. Milly always denied to me that she met with Mr. Lovel; and he lied in the same way. My only chance of reproving the pair properly was to catch them together. Therefore I told John—my groom, you know—to drive on to the house of Dr. Lester, whither Mrs. Drass had gone to consult him; and I went in search of those two young fools."

"Did you find them?" asked Paul, rather foolishly it must be confessed.

"What a question, after what Brent told you!" retorted Miss Clyde. "Yes, I found them—but not at once. Lucas gave me the slip, and I searched for him in the wrong direction—down by the river, where I thought they might be wandering under the willows. They were not there, however, though I wasted some time in looking for them. At length it struck me that they might be in the Winding Lane; and when I got there I saw them sure enough. But I must confess," said Miss Clyde with much disgust, "that I wondered they should choose a place haunted by all the rustic lovers of the neighbourhood."

"There were no rustic lovers on that night."

"No; I believe they had all gone to some revival meeting at the Methodist Chapel. It was half-past

eight when I got to the lane, and I saw only Brent coming down towards the village."

"Yes; to meet Jane Bilway in St. Dunstan's Square, and take her to the Methodist Chapel."

"Hm! and he met me apparently following Lucas and Milly," said Miss Clyde; "wherewith he accuses me of the murder. I'll be even with him for that—the brute! As a matter of fact, I did not see the two until I passed Brent; then I espied them walking arm-in-arm towards the stile which leads on to the common."

"Did you speak to them then?"

"No," confessed Miss Clyde frankly, "for to tell you the truth, I did not like the part I was playing. It was too like that of a spy. I stopped at the other end of the lane—near the town—and waited till they should come back, when I intended to meet them as if by accident. But I never saw them again that night. Poor Milly!" sighed Miss Clyde, "I little thought I had looked on her pretty face for the last time."

"How was it you did not see them again?" asked Paul curiously.

"Because they did not return to where I was; stopped to talk at the stile, no doubt. I waited for ten minutes, and then I heard a man singing and shouting. He came from the town, and could not get over the stile into the lane. I heard him saying something about killing Lovel, and I noted that he held a pistol. At once I went up to him, and found—as I expected from his condition—that it was Dr. Lester."

"Quite drunk?"

"Senselessly drunk, but able to stumble along. F

thought that if he met Lucas in the company of his daughter he might fire at him, so I dismissed all idea of seeing the young people again and devoted myself to getting rid of Dr. Lester. I took the pistol off him, and being quite incapable of resistance, he gave it up readily enough. Then I wheeled him round, and taking his arm, I led him home."

"What!" cried Paul, starting up, "did you take him back to his house?"

"I attempted to," said Miss Clyde; "but he turned restive, and wanted to go back to the lane. I then coaxed him out into the country, on the road to my own house. But I only got him a very little way when he suddenly became too drunk to stand, so I dragged him into some bushes beside the road, and as it was a fine night, I left him there to recover his senses. I suppose he stayed there till dawn, and then made his way home."

"What did you do?"

"I put the revolver into my pocket and walked home. The next morning I heard of the murder, and of Dr. Lester's arrest."

"Did you hear the shot?"

"No; I suppose I was too far on my road homeward to hear it, or else I was not paying attention. At all events, I heard nothing."

"Why did you not tell all this to Drek, and prevent the arrest of Lester?"

"My friend," said Miss Clyde, gravely, "I was determined to give Dr. Lester a lesson—such a lesson that in future he might restrain himself from indulging in drink. I thought, when I heard that he was ar-

rested, that the thought that he had killed his own child might induce him to take the pledge. If this lesson does not teach him temperance, nothing will; for if I had not taken the pistol off him, he might have killed, if not Milly, at least Lucas. I intended to go to Drek to-morrow and tell him the truth, and get Lester bailed out of gaol."

"Your lesson is rather a severe one," said Paul thoughtfully; "but perhaps it is needed. If anything can make a sober man of Lester, his imprisonment on such an awful charge will change him. I remember now that he confessed at the inquest that he met someone, but was too confused to say whether it was a man or a woman. It must have been you."

"Yes, it was I, Mr. Mexton. While I was leading him away from the Winding Lane I did not see a soul. As to the red mud on his clothes, you remember I told you how he fell while trying to get over the stile."

"I see you can clear Lester," said Paul with emphasis, "but what about Lovel?"

"Well," said Miss Clyde interrogatively—"you don't suspect him of the crime?"

"I don't know; you left him with Milly!"

"I daresay; at twenty-five minutes to nine; but he no doubt left her before nine o'clock, when the murder was committed."

"He can't prove that."

"He hasn't had a chance of doing so," retorted Miss Clyde, visibly disturbed.

"Pardon me; he had at the inquest, and he lied."

"Well, we won't discuss that," said Miss Clyde, rising. "I am sure Mr. Lovel is innocent, and can prove

his innocence if needful. I have told you all I know, Mr. Mexton, and I'll tell Drek to-morrow. I suppose I'll see you at the funeral this afternoon?"

"Yes," said Paul, gravely. "I shall be at the funeral," and then the two parted.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### "DUST TO DUST."

WHEN Paul returned to Barnstead he felt satisfied that he had done wisely in seeking the confidence of Miss Clyde. Without doubt her statement had simplified matters in connection with the crime, although it had not altogether solved the mystery which shrouded the death of Milly. Instead of suspecting three people, as he had done prior to his visit, Paul now directed his energies to the discovery of the guilt of one, and that one, as may be guessed, was Lucas Lovel. Miss Clyde had exonerated herself; she had proved the innocence of Lester; so the obtainable evidence now pointed to the guilt of Lovel. Herne and Iris believed that he had committed the crime; Brent and Miss Clyde insisted that he was innocent; and Gran Jimboy, for a reason of her own, had provided a lying alibi to extricate the suspected man from a dangerous position. Paul, reflecting on the situation, did not know what view to take.

There was no doubt that Lovel recognised his danger, and had induced the old gipsy to aid him in averting it by perjuring herself at the inquest; also he had bribed the ploughman Brent into concealing his pres-

ence in the Winding Lane on the fatal night, at the fatal hour. But one thing was certain, that Lovel was the last person who had seen the murdered girl alive. This was proved by the evidence of Brent and Miss Clyde—both friendly witnesses to Lovel—both of whom stated distinctly that he had been with Milly Lester within half an hour of her death. It was therefore impossible, as Paul thought, that he should not know something about the murder, if, indeed, he had not committed it himself. Yet, if he were guilty, he would have sought safety in flight; but as yet he still lingered at The Herne Arms.

"I'll see if he comes to the funeral," said Paul to himself as he sat at luncheon; "that will go far, to my mind, to prove if he is innocent or guilty. If Milly is really dead by his hand, I don't think he will have the hardihood to see her body placed in a grave. If, on the other hand, he did not kill her, he will come to her burial, and I can tell from his demeanour what his thoughts are. Even the most reticent man must reveal his feelings at such a moment; and if Lovel is guilty, he will be wise enough to keep away."

Going by this theory, the suspected man was innocence itself, for when Paul joined the throng of curious sightseers which was crowding into the cemetery, one of the first persons he saw was Lucas Lovel. Nay, more; the young man did not lurk in the background, but thrust himself forward so as to compose one of the group which stood immediately round the grave. He was dressed in black; pale, but composed, he exhibited none of the agitation which a guilty man would have found it difficult to conceal. Tested thus, and



tested by his own free-will, Lovel was innocent; and despite the evidence to the contrary, and the openly stated beliefs of Iris and Herne, the journalist was inclined to believe that Lovel had not killed the girl.

Naturally, under the circumstances, there was a great concourse of people at the funeral of the dead girl. Iris and Mrs. Mexton were there, Paul and Lovel, Miss Clyde and Mrs. Drass; also Herne, who had been engaged to the deceased, and Francis Chaskin, who read the service over that untimely grave. But these persons attended because they were kinsfolk and friends of the person whom they were burying. The majority of the crowd were attracted to the spot by morbid curiosity. It had been rumoured that Dr. Lester, who was suspected of the murder, would be allowed to attend the funeral of his unfortunate child; and the crowd were determined to give him a warm reception for his insolence in attending the successful outcome of his iniquity. Fortunately, however, for the decency of the funeral, Lester remained locked up in Marborough Gaol, and the multitude, or rather the mob, of over-zealous persons, were disappointed. There was no one at whom to gaze as a genuine criminal; no one to shoot, or to throw stones at; and when the earth was heaped over the coffin of Milly Lester, the throng melted away with the conviction that it had been swindled out of a sensation. The burial had proved less interesting than they expected.

Chaskin was overcome with emotion several times as he read the service, and Paul wondered if what Miss Clyde had asserted was true, and if the vicar had also been conquered by the triumphant beauty of Milly.

It seemed likely, but Paul had heard no rumour in confirmation of the report. From the face of Chaskin he looked to that of Herne, and saw that the latter was scowling at Lovel, who, with his bent head and dejected mien, stood on the other side of the grave. Lucas took no notice of Herne's stern gaze, but stared with tearful eyes into the hole, at the bottom of which lay the coffin of Milly Lester. So sad did he look, so overcome with a sorrow far removed from remorse or terror, that Mexton unhesitatingly acquitted him of complicity in the crime. Whosoever had cut short the thread of that young existence, it was not Lucal Lovel.

Later on Paul caught a glimpse of Gran Jimboy's red cloak flaming on the outskirts of the crowd; and when the service was over he went to look for her, in the hope of discovering why she lied at the inquest. But either the old dame had guessed his intention, or did not want to be spoken to by anyone; for before he could reach the spot where he had seen her standing, she had vanished and he could not determine in which direction she had gone. While he was wondering how he should find her he was greeted by Darcy Herne, who looked haggard and worn in his black clothes.

"Mr. Mexton," said he, leading Paul to one side for confidential discourse, "I know from Iris that you are looking for the assassin of Milly. Well, I wish you to do nothing further in the matter till I return."

"Till you return!" repeated Paul, with a swift glance at the pallid face of his companion. "Are you going away?"

"Yes; I am going to London."

"On one of your missions connected with religious work?"

"No; on a mission connected with the murder of my poor Milly."

"Really!" Paul looked sceptical. "I can't conceive how the commission of a crime in Barnstead can take you to London. May I ask for your reasons?"

"Not at present," replied Herne quietly; "later on I may explain them."

"At least tell me why you wish me to do nothing in the matter until your return?"

"No," said Darcy decisively; "the explanation has too much to do with my reasons."

"But I have found out something which goes to prove that you are right in suspecting Lovel."

"I do not suspect Lovel," was Herne's strange answer.

Paul was bewildered. "But you said——"

"I know what I said, Mexton; but I was wrong. I don't think Lovel killed Milly."

"Then who did? Dr. Lester is innocent; I have discovered that much."

"I know he is innocent," rejoined the squire; "and so is Lovel. As to the guilty person, my journey to London is concerned with that."

"You have a suspicion?"

"I have; but it may go for nothing."

"When did you find this clue you are following to London?"

"On the day you and I and Chaskin examined the spot where the murder was committed."

"Oh!" Paul's thoughts flew back to Herne's trance,

and subsequent behaviour. "So you think that the rainbow feather is a clue?"

"What do you know about the rainbow feather?" questioned Herne sharply.

"Nothing—save that you picked up a parti-coloured feather, and called it by that name. Is it a clue?"

"I think so. I am not sure," replied Darcy, doubtfully. "I'll tell you on my return."

"When do you return?"

"In three days. Have I your promise not to pursue the investigation against Lovel till I come back?"

"Oh, yes!" said Paul, yielding readily enough, the more easily as at the moment he did not know how to act in the matter. "I'll do nothing till you come back and explain. But the rainbow feather——"

"Good-day, Mexton; I'm in a hurry," said Herne, cutting short the speech; "in three days you will know as much as I do about that feather."

He hurried away, and Paul stood looking after him, wondering how the discovery of a dyed feather could affect the case. Had some blood-thirsty person come down from London especially to murder Milly, and had the rainbow feather been left as the sign manual of the work, after the fashion of a secret society? Paul smiled at the fantasy of the idea. Milly did not know anyone in London—or rather had not known, since the poor girl must now be spoken of in the past tense—and the fame of her beauty could not have spread beyond the environs of Barnstead and Marborough. The tragedy of her death had given her a fame much wider.

After some meditation Paul found himself unable

to explain Herne's conversation; and for the time being he put the matter of the squire's departure to London out of his mind. His attention was further distracted by the approach of Miss Clyde, her companion, and Iris. This trio paused before him, and Iris began to talk.

"Paul," she said, lifting her veil, "Miss Clyde is exceedingly kind. She intends to offer herself as bail for my step-father."

"With Mr. Mexton, of course!" said Miss Clyde in her hearty voice. "We can go to Marborough tomorrow, and after the due formalities, have Dr. Lester released. Then he can come back here."

"Alone?" said Mexton, thinking of Lester's weakness.

"Ah," cried Mrs. Drass, penetrating his thoughts, "that is just what I say! If Dr. Lester comes back, he will take to the brandy-bottle again."

"I don't think so," said Iris, shaking her head. "Miss Clyde's lesson has been very severe."

"Oh! so you know that Dr. Lester is innocent, Iris?"

"Of course she does," interposed Miss Clyde cheerfully. "I told her about it before the funeral."

"Well," said Mrs. Drass with a doubtful look, "I only hope that the lesson will do the doctor good; but you mark my words, he'll drink again when alone in his own house."

"He won't be alone," said Iris quietly. "I shall come back with him."

"And leave my mother, Iris?" said Paul.

"Yes. Mrs. Mexton thinks I should be with my

stepfather; and I think so also. He has lost poor Milly, and I must do my best to comfort him."

"I saw you talking to Mr. Herne," said Mrs. Drass to Paul. "What has he to say to this death, Mr. Mexton?"

"He is very much concerned, Mrs. Drass, and wishes to hunt down the assassin."

"Lucas Lov——" began Iris quickly, and then stopped, as she recollected how Miss Clyde loved the suspected man.

"Oh! go on," said Miss Clyde, with all calmness. "I know Mr. Lovel is innocent, so I don't mind how much you and Mr. Herne suspect him."

"I beg your pardon," said Paul, "but Mr. Herne does not suspect Lovel now."

"Why not?" asked Iris, astonished.

Paul shook his head. "I can't tell you," he said, "but Mr. Herne asked me to do nothing further in the matter touching Mr. Lovel."

"What have you done?" asked Miss Clyde sharply.

"I have found out that he was with Milly twenty minutes before the murder."

"He was not!" cried Mrs. Drass eagerly; "he was in Mother Jimboy's tent. She swore that he was!"

"I know," replied Paul quietly; "and she swore a lie. Miss Clyde knows."

"I know that Lucas went into the Winding Lane with Milly," said Miss Clyde in rather a troubled voice; "but no doubt he left her at the stile and went straight on to the gypsy tent."

"But he swore at the inquest that he was not in the lane on that night!" said Iris.

"I know; I know, my dear," was Miss Clyde's reply. "But he did that to save himself from being unjustly suspected. I don't believe he killed Milly; and you hear what Mr. Mexton says: that Mr. Herne is of the same opinion."

"His opinion has changed then!" remarked Iris, "and I should like to ask him why."

"You can't at present, Iris. Mr. Herne has just gone to London."

"To London!" echoed Miss Clyde, in surprise. "What bad taste to go away so soon after the funeral. Why has he gone?"

"I don't know, Miss Clyde."

"But I do," said Mrs. Drass, with a sniff; "he has gone to see that minx!"

"What minx?" asked Paul, astonished.

"Catinka, the violinist," replied Mrs. Drass, coolly. "Oh, Mr. Lovel told me all about that hussy! Mr. Herne did not love Milly; he loves this Catinka, and she loves him. That was why Mr. Herne went up to town so often; and why he has gone now."

"Impossible!" said Mexton, growing pale as he thought of his own passion for the violinist.

"I tell you it is so!" rejoined Mrs. Drass, wrathfully. "If she doesn't love him, why did she come down here?"

"To Marborough?"

"No, to Barnstead. She was in the church on the night Milly was murdered."

"What!" cried Iris, sharply. "Was she the strange lady I saw leaving the church?"

"She was!" said Mrs. Drass, triumphantly. "I saw

her, too, and made it my business to find out all about her. There was a Marborough friend of mine in the church who saw Catinka when she gave her concert. She tells me to-day—I have just parted from her—that the strange lady who was in the church on that night was Catinka. Now what do you say, Mr. Mex-ton?"

Paul had nothing to say. He did not even open his lips, but wondered if Catinka had anything to do with the rainbow feather, the finding of which had disturbed Herne so greatly.



## CHAPTER XV.

### DR. LESTER TELLS A STORY.

WITH the discovery that Catinka had visited Barnstead on the night of the murder a new element entered into the case. Paul was satisfied that both Dr. Lester and Miss Clyde were innocent of the crime; and that Lovel, although appearances were against him, might possibly be guiltless also. Failing these three individuals, there remained no one who might have an interest in getting rid of the girl; but now that Catinka's presence in Barnstead had been proved by the gossip of Mrs. Drass and her friend from Marborough, it was not impossible that she might have something to do with the matter. She might even have shot Milly; for here the quality of jealousy might come into play. Herne, as was stated by Lovel and Mrs. Drass, knew the violinist, and had paid several visits to her in London. What, then, more likely than that she was in love with him and he with her, and that the discovery of his engagement and near marriage to Milly might have prompted Catinka to remove a possible rival from her path? But this, as Paul admitted to himself, was all theory; and the facts supporting it had yet to be proved.

In the meantime, according to his promise to the absent Herne, the journalist took no immediate steps towards prosecuting his inquiries relative to proving the guilt of Lovel. He was determined to do nothing further until the squire's return, and possible explanation; and pending this result Paul betook himself to Marborough in the company of Miss Clyde, for the purpose of releasing Dr. Lester from gaol. The proceedings in furtherance of this object included an interview with Drek.

They found the inspector at the police office in a very tranquil frame of mind. He had quite overcome his early doubts about Eliza's evidence, and was now quite convinced that Lester was guilty. Also he congratulated himself on his own cleverness in capturing the criminal so speedily; quite ignoring the fact that the discovery of the guilty person—as he deemed Lester to be—had been thrust upon him. As to Mex-ton's dealings with the case, Drek had not given them a thought; and he was surprised when the journalist and Miss Clyde called to see him.

"Well," said Drek, when the formalities of the reception were ended, "and what do you wish to see me about, Mr. Mexton?"

"About the bail of Lester."

Drek shook his head. "I am afraid you will find that difficult," he said, sapiently.

"Why? Miss Clyde and myself are willing to give a bond for Lester's due appearance at his trial. You know we can pay; that we are good for a thousand pounds. I don't suppose the magistrates will ask for a larger amount?"

"I don't think they'll ask for any amount!" replied Drek, drily, "because I do not think they will grant bail."

"What!" exclaimed Miss Clyde—"do you mean to say that they intend to keep Lester in gaol until the trial?"

"Yes, Miss Clyde; that is exactly what I do mean. The evidence is so clear against the prisoner that he will find it hard to escape the gallows. If he is released, he would certainly make a bolt of it."

"I don't think so, Mr. Drek—for the simple reason that Dr. Lester is innocent."

"Innocent!" repeated Drek, in surprise; "why the man doesn't even attempt to defend himself!"

"I am aware of that," retorted Miss Clyde; "and why?—because Dr. Lester does not recollect the events of that night. If he did he would know that he did not shoot his daughter."

"Have you any reason for believing in his innocence?" asked Drek, puzzled by her speech.

"The best of reasons, Mr. Inspector. I took this pistol from him before the shot was fired at nine o'clock."

Drek started, and taking the weapon which Miss Clyde presented to him, he examined it carefully. "Yes," he said, after a pause; "I see the name Lester is engraved on this piece of silver, so I have no doubt it is the pistol of Dr. Lester. May I ask how it came into your possession?"

Miss Clyde replied to this question by telling in detail the story she had related to Paul on a previous occasion. Drek listened without interruption, his eyes

fastened on her face, to judge by the expression if she was telling the truth. Apparently he was satisfied, for when the tale ended, he said, after a short meditation:

"I think you are right, Miss Clyde. Lester is innocent, and if you tell this story to the magistrate you will have no difficulty in having your bail accepted. But I must own that I am rather disappointed. I made so certain that the man was guilty."

"Well, Mr. Drek, you see he is not."

"H'm! I wonder who did kill the girl?" said Drek, musingly.

"It is impossible to say at present," said Paul, on whom the gaze of the inspector rested; "at present the whole matter is enveloped in mystery."

It will be seen that Paul said nothing about his suspicions regarding Lovel, or mentioned the fact of Catinka's visit to Barnstead. The fact is, after the impetuous act of Drek in arresting Lester, the journalist did not think it advisable to speak too plainly, lest the inspector should put Lovel in gaol. It was best, thought Paul, to first secure absolute proof against the man, before calling in the aid of the law; and, knowing as much as he did, Mexton determined, when Herne returned, to follow up the clues regarding Lovel himself. As to Catinka, her connection with the matter was so vague at present, that Paul said nothing about her, until—as in the case of Lovel—he had proof of her guilt.

"Well," said Drek, seeing that he could obtain no aid from either Miss Clyde or Mexton, "it seems that I have been too hasty, although against Lester the

evidence was clear enough. I must go with you to get him released for the time being; and begin again in the attempt to discover the mystery."

"It is my opinion that you will discover nothing," said Miss Clyde, as they left the police office; "the mystery of Milly's death will remain one."

There was no difficulty about the release of Lester. The inspector took his visitors before the magistrate, and repeated—with corrections from Miss Clyde—the tale about the pistol. Much impressed by the story, the magistrate accepted bail for Lester at a thousand pounds on the bonds of Miss Clyde and Mexton. At the same time he reproved Miss Clyde for not having told her story at the inquest.

"Dr. Lester is innocent," he said, "and should not have been put in gaol."

"Dr. Lester is a drunkard," retorted Miss Clyde, "and the fright of being a prisoner on the charge of murder may reform him."

"I doubt it; I doubt it greatly."

That was all the magistrate said; but he granted the order of release, and the three went off to the gaol, where they saw Lester, and speedily brought him out of his cell. The man was haggard and worn with anxiety and remorse—for he was not quite clear in his mind as to his innocence—so Paul took him to his mother's house, and gave him a meal. He even insisted that he should have a whisky-and-soda, though Lester protested he did not want it.

"I shall never touch alcohol again," he said, piteously; "it made me mad on that night. For all I know I may have killed Milly."

"That you did not," rejoined Miss Clyde; and told her story for the third time. Lester listened in silence, and the tears rolled down his cheeks when he heard how mercifully he had been preserved from committing a terrible crime.

"I am thankful to God for having preserved me by your hand," he said, when she finished; "and I am grateful to you for having given me a lesson sadly needed."

"I hope the lesson is learnt," said Miss Clyde, drily.

"You may be sure it is," replied Dr. Lester, eagerly. "I shall never touch strong drink again; I shall go back to Barnstead, and work hard to redeem my character. Iris, will you come with me?"

"Of course, father!" said Iris, who was present; "we will return this evening, and begin a new life."

"Poor Milly! poor child!" sighed Lester. "Could it be that Lovel killed her?"

"No; he did not!" replied Miss Clyde, sharply. "Mr. Lovel is quite innocent! If I have done you a service, Dr. Lester, don't repay me by accusing the man I love of a crime."

"I shall say nothing—nothing," answered Lester, who was quite broken down; and then Paul led him away into his own particular den for a confidential talk. He wished to learn what he could about the relations of Herne with Catinka, and thought that Lester might inform him. It was the merest chance that anything might come of the conversation, yet Paul determined to try. In his present perplexity he was like a drowning man, and clutched at a straw.

"I wish to put a few questions to you, doctor," said

he, when Lester was comfortably established with a full pipe, "and you must answer them honestly."

"I will do so, Paul; you may command me," replied the man, submissively.

"Very good, doctor. You know that Milly was engaged to Darcy Herne?"

"Yes, I know that; everyone knew it."

"And that Lucas Lovel admired Milly so much that he wished to marry her?"

"I know that also," said Lester, with a clouded face. "It was my poor child's meetings with that man which indirectly brought about her death."

"We will talk of that later," replied Paul; "but I want to know if Lovel ever saw you with reference to his passion?"

"Yes, he did. About a week before Milly's death he came and told me that he loved her."

"What did you do?"

"I told him that he was a scoundrel to speak so, seeing that my daughter was engaged to Squire Herne. Then I showed him the door."

"Did he take the hint?"

"No. He said that he had come to inform me that Herne was not a fit husband for Milly."

"Oh!" said Paul, recalling the accusations of Lovel, in the presence of himself and Chaskin when on the spot where the murder had taken place; "he said that Herne led a double life, didn't he?"

"Yes!" replied Lester in surprise. "How did you know?"

"I heard something of it before from Lovel himself. Tell me exactly what was said."

Lester thought for a moment. "He said that Herne was in love with a violinist called Catinka."

"I know Catinka," said Paul; "she is a Polish woman, and gave concerts in this city. I saw her once or twice, but I did not have much conversation with her."

"Is she beautiful?"

"She is very beautiful," replied Mexton, blushing; "I admired her very much; indeed, I fancied at one time that I was in love with her. But I see now that I was mistaken."

"How long is it since you saw her?"

"About a year. But tell me, doctor, what else did Lovel say?"

"Nothing much," replied Lester, with a shrug. "He declared that Herne went to visit Catinka in Bloomsbury Square."

"Oh, is that the address?" said Paul, taking out his note-book.

"It is. Number one thousand, Bloomsbury Square," said Lester. "Why do you make a note of it?"

"I'll tell you later on. What did you say to Lovel?"

"I told him that I would ask Herne as to the truth of these accusations."

"Did you do so?"

"I did. The very next time that he called at the house I saw him myself, and told him what Lovel said."

"Did he defend himself?"

"No." was Lester's unexpected reply. "He said that he knew Catinka well, and that he often visited her in



London; but that his friendship with her was nothing to which Milly, or I, as Milly's father, could object."

"How did he explain this friendship?"

"On the ground that Catinka was a fellow-worker with him to help the afflicted. From what I can gather the lady seems to be a kind of Socialist, who uses her profession to mask her real business, which is intriguing against Russia. She wishes, so Herne said, to free her country, and enlisted him in her society."

"Oh, she has a society, then?"

"Oh, yes; it is called, as Herne told me, 'The Society of the Rainbow Feather.'"

"What!" cried Paul, jumping up. "The Rainbow Feather?"

"You are excited," said Lester.

"Excited!" echoed Paul, walking hurriedly to and fro—"I have every reason to be so! Do you know that a rainbow feather was found by Herne on the very spot where Milly lay dead?"

"What of that?" asked Lester, whose slow brain could not follow Paul's idea.

"Can't you see—Catinka must have dropped that feather there!"

"But she is in London!"

"She was in Barnstead on the night of the murder," replied Paul, sharply; "and by the evidence of that feather she must have been in the Winding Lane on the night of the murder."

"I can't see her reason."

"I can. She heard that Herne was engaged to Milly and came down to see her. She followed her to the Winding Lane, and, for all I know, shot her."

"Why should she shoot Milly?" cried Lester, rising.

"I don't know; I can't say. I must find out. Lester, not a word of this to anyone. You return to Barnstead with Iris, and I'll go up to London to-morrow."

"To see Catinka?"

"Yes, and Herne. What; you don't know? Herne has gone up to London also, about that feather. I am sure of it, though I have no proof. I'll call at Bloomsbury Square, and find out the truth about him and Catinka. Also, I'll know why she came to Barnstead, and what she was doing in the Winding Lane."

"But how can you get her to speak?"

"How? By means of the Rainbow Feather, of course!"

## CHAPTER XVI.

### CATINKA.

BEFORE Iris departed for Barnstead with her step-father, she contrived to have a short talk with Paul. The girl was touched by the kindly way in which her old playfellow had behaved to Dr. Lester and herself in their trouble; and she wished to thank him for his disinterested zeal. Seizing the opportunity when her step-father was conversing with Miss Clyde, she took Mexton by the hand.

"How can I ever thank you for all you have done?" she said.

Her face was flushed with a rosy hue, her eyes sparkled like stars; and at the moment, stirred by generous emotion, Iris Link was a beautiful woman. Paul had never noted the fact before—perhaps from long familiarity with her face, and an unavoidable comparison of it with the brilliant beauty of the dead Milly. The revelation of the soul which rendered her beautiful came on him with unexpected force, and he wondered how he could have been so blind as not to have admired her before. In that moment love germinated with unexpected suddenness in his soul; and he pressed the girl's hand warmly.

"Don't thank me at all, my dear," he said in a low voice. "I am only too glad to help you and yours."

"Will you come to Barnstead this evening, Paul?"

"No, Iris. I have a great deal of work to get through before going to London."

"You are going to London?"

"To-morrow morning. I fancy I have a clue to the identity of the person who killed Milly."

"Does the clue guide you to London?"

"Yes. I have ascertained that a third person was in the Winding Lane on that night when Milly and Lovel met."

"Who is the person?"

"Catinka, the Polish violinist," replied Paul; and forthwith he told Iris all that he had learned regarding the rainbow feather from Dr. Lester.

"It certainly looks as though she had been there," said Iris thoughtfully; "but it is impossible that she could have killed my sister."

"Why?" From all accounts she is in love with Herne."

"I don't believe she is!" insisted Miss Link. "Mr. Herne's explanation to my father is far more likely. I fancy her association with him is founded on patriotic grounds. She knows that he is rich and enthusiastic, and wishes to secure him as a member of her ridiculous society. With his money she could do a great deal towards her object of inciting a revolt against Russia."

"That is very probable. But on these grounds I do not see why she came to Barnstead on the night of the murder."

"Nor I. You must ask her that yourself, Paul," added Iris suddenly. "Is not this the lady you love?"

Paul blushed in his turn. "It is Catinka whom I admired," he replied with an emphasis on the last word; "but I do not love her—at least, not now. My fancy for her has passed away. My heart is free—far more so than yours, Iris."

"What do you mean?" asked his companion, a trifle coldly.

"Why," said Paul in surprise—"surely you know! Do you not love Darcy Herne?"

"No, Paul; my fancy for him has died away, like yours for Catinka."

"For what reason?"

"One which satisfies myself," said Iris resolutely, "but one I cannot tell you."

Paul looked searchingly at her, but the cold look on her face baffled his scrutiny. "I do not understand you," he said, turning away his eyes.

"I don't understand myself," replied Iris bitterly, "but some day I may do so. At present, my dear Paul, you may be sure that my heart is as free as your own."

"Our hearts may not always remain in such a forlorn condition," said Paul suggestively.

Iris looked at him suddenly, and saw something in the expression of his face which made her blush. With the evasive instinct of a woman, she turned hastily away.

"See—papa is going," she said hurriedly. "I must follow him. Good-bye, Paul."

"Good-bye, Iris," was his reply; and when the two went away from the house with Miss Clyde—who had

to return to Barnstead also—Paul stood looking after them with a smile on his lips.

“Strange if Iris should turn out to be my fate after all,” he said to himself; and then went off to the office of the “Tory Times.” His presence there was much needed, and he had to discard all speculation about Iris and a possible wedding, in order to plunge into journalistic work connected mostly with the dry subjects of politics.

The next morning, having finished his work, and obtained the necessary leave from his editor, Paul went up to London by the express train. It was noon when he arrived at Victoria, and he had luncheon in a Strand restaurant before calling on Catinka. Here Fate served him well, for she brought him into contact with a rising musician, who might be supposed to know all that there was to be known about the Polish violinist. Signor Baldini was a young man of Italian blood on the maternal side, and he had taken the maiden name of his mother, as more likely to look well on music paper. He had written one or two songs which had been more or less successful, and now he contemplated composing the music of a comic opera, which was—in his own estimation—to place him on a level with Sir Arthur Sullivan. Paul was hailed cheerily by this individual, and they were soon in confidential discourse.

After a chat about the comic opera, and people to whom they were both known, Paul ventured to ask his companion concerning Catinka. At this question Signor Baldini shrugged his shoulders.

“I have not seen her lately,” he said, candidly. “She

does not play so frequently as she once did. You see her name rarely on the St. James's Hall programmes now."

"Have the public got tired of her, then?"

"Not that I know of. I rather fancy it is she who has grown tired of the public. The fact is, Mexton, that charming young lady has a bee in her bonnet."

"What sort of a bee?"

"A political bee, that is intended to sting the Autocrat of all the Russias. Catinka is a Pole, you know, and of late she has been mixed up in politics of the Socialistic sort. I never take up a paper without expecting to see her name figuring as the heroine who has thrown a bomb at the Czar."

"Is she known to be a Socialist?"

"Well, it isn't in the papers, you know; but it is pretty generally talked about. Catinka has a kind of society, of which she is the leader."

"The Rainbow Feather Society?"

"Yes. I see you have heard of it, even in your native wilds. Did you ever hear so absurd a name, or imagined so ridiculous a symbol? A feather plucked from a goose and dyed in bars of red, blue, yellow, and green. Symbolical, no doubt, but no one outside the society knows the meanings thereof."

"Who belongs to this association?"

"Long-haired Poles and Russian exiles, and all that sort," replied the signor in a tone of disgust; "the most respectable member is a fellow called Darcy Herne."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes. I met him once at a musical party given by the lady. At least, it was called so," said Baldini, cor-

recting himself; "but I daresay it was a gathering of conspirators. This Herne was there, and seemed a cracked kind of creature, full of whims. Believes in equality, and looking after the oppressed, and all that sort of rubbish. Religious, too, and has the Bible at his finger ends. Do you know him?" asked the musician in his turn.

"I do. He is the Squire of Barnstead, near which village I live."

"Then why doesn't he look after his preserves instead of mixing himself up in Catinka's mad schemes? She'll get him into trouble."

"I met her once," said Paul thoughtfully, "but I had not much opportunity of reading her character. What kind of young woman is she?"

"Oh, one of the Charlotte Corday sort!"

"She lives in Bloomsbury Square, I believe?"

"Yes—Number one thousand," said Baldini, rising. "If you intend to call on her, I warn you, my friend, you won't be well received. She cares for nothing but Anarchists."

"And Herne?"

"Oh, that's nonsense. She only cares for him because she wants his money to work up a plot against the Czar."

"Then there is no love in the matter?"

"Love!" echoed the signor contemptuously. "If you knew Catinka well you wouldn't ask so absurd a question. She's got no more heart than one of those bombs her friends manufacture. Well, good-day, Mexton; glad to see you. Sorry to go, but awfully busy," and Signor Baldini rattled himself out of the



door, as though his life depended on speedy movement.

Left alone, Paul finished his luncheon thoughtfully. The explanation given by Baldini seemed to put the guilt of Catinka out of the question; at all events, it removed the sole motive she could have for such a wicked act—that of jealousy. If she was not in love with Herne, she could not be jealous at hearing—as she must have heard—of his engagement to Milly; and if she was not jealous, she had no reason to commit so preposterous a crime. Yet she had been in Barnstead Church on the night of the crime—as was proved by the Marlborough friend of Mrs. Drass—and she had been on the fatal spot also, as was confirmed by the evidence of the rainbow feather picked up by Herne. What was the badge of a political society doing in the Winding Lane? and why had Herne seemed so startled when he picked it up? It was these questions which Paul wished to ask of Catinka; in the answering of which he hoped to find a clue to the assassin. He was convinced that the solution of the mystery was connected with the rainbow feather.

Catinka, as he found, occupied the first floor of a gloomy old mansion in Bloomsbury Square. When Paul ascended the wide staircase, which had borne the tread of Georgian belles and beaux, he found himself before a massive door, which bore a brass plate, upon which the name "Catinka" was inscribed. No one knew what was the Polish girl's surname, as she preferred to be known by that which she had made famous in the world of music. Perhaps she intended to reveal who she was when heading the intended revolt

against Russia; but in all artistic London she was known only by her first name; and then, as everybody stated, "Catinka" by itself looked well on the bills.

A sallow maidservant with rather a foreign air opened the door, and conveyed the card of Paul to her mistress. Speedily she returned, and led him into a cosy sitting-room with two windows which looked out on to the grimy trees in the centre of the square. It did not appear like the den of a conspirator, for the paper was of a cheerful pattern, the chairs and sofa were covered with rose-sprigged chintz, and on the walls were portraits, signed by the leading musicians and singers of the day. Judging from the number of these, Catinka was a favourite with her fellow-artistes.

There was also a grand piano, covered with loose sheets of music, and a violin lying carelessly on the top; but what attracted Paul most was a fan of stained feathers, which was spread out in front of the mirror over the mantelpiece. The four colours mentioned by Baldini stretched in bars across the fan; and Paul became aware that he was looking at the symbol of the Anarchist society of which he had lately heard so much. Dyed feathers and an innocent-looking fan; yet the sign of the hatred borne by a crushed country against its conqueror. Paul was struck by the incongruity of the symbol and its meaning.

"Good-day to you, sir," said a voice behind him, with a slight foreign accent. "You wish for to—ah!" broke off Catinka, as Paul turned—"it is my nice critic of the English town! How do you do, Mr. Mexton?"

"You have not forgotten me," said Paul, in rather a faltering voice.

"Oh, my dear, no! I never forget those who speak well of me. Sit down, you good young critic, and let us talk of what you wish."

The violinist was a pretty, sparkling brunette, of no great height, with an olive-hued face, handsome and calm. She was dressed to perfection in a tea-gown of amber-coloured silk, trimmed with black lace; and her back hair was gathered into a kind of coronet, through which was thrust a tortoise-shell silver-headed pin. She was all vivacity and charm and sympathy; yet Baldini had assured him that she had no heart and that she was a dangerous conspirator. Paul could believe neither statement in the presence of this dainty little lady.

"And now, Mr. Mexton," cried Catinka, when they were seated, "why you come for this visit—eh?"

"I want to ask you a question."

"Oh yes; assuredly. What you will, my dear sir?"

"It has to do with Barnstead," said Paul, in a hesitating manner.

Catinka's charming face hardened, and she shot a keen look at Paul. "Ah!" said she, after a pause; "that is a place near to your city where I was giving—a concert. Quite so. Oh, yes. And what you say about Barnstead?"

"I want to know why you were in Barnstead Church three weeks ago?"

"Eh?" said Catinka, attempting no denial. "You see me there?"

"No, but I know that you were there—and also that you were in the Winding Lane on the night a young lady was killed."

Catinka leaned her cheek on her hand and looked at him curiously. "You are a police?" she asked.

"No, but I wish to know why you were there?"

"Oh, most certainly, my dear sir, you shall," said the violinist calmly. "I was in your Barnstead to watch on Mr. Herne—Darcy Herne—who was there on that night also."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE SOCIETY OF THE RAINBOW FEATHER.

THE statement made by Catinka was so incredible and improbable that Paul could only stare and repeat it. "You came to Barnstead to watch Mr. Herne!" he said, slowly. "I do not quite understand. Mr. Herne was in London on that night.

"Ah! pardon, but no," replied Catinka, vivaciously. "Mr. Herne—this good man—he was at your Barnstead; but he does not require one to speak of it. So he requests me."

"You have seen Herne?" cried Mexton, recalling the fact that the Squire was in town at that moment.

"Eh—why not? I see him yesterday; I see him this morning; and he ask me to say nothing of his veesit to Barnstead on that night. But I no promise; I have good reason to no promise."

"What reason?" asked the journalist, bewildered by her manner.

Before replying, Catinka sprang lightly from her seat, and caught up the fan of rainbow feathers from off the mantelpiece. "My reason, dear Mr. Critic? Behold it!"

"Ah! then your reason has to do with your society?"

"Oh, yes; it has all to do with that," said Catinka,

shutting the fan composedly. "I will to you explain all, if you wish."

"Of course I wish, mademoiselle. I wish to find out who killed that poor girl."

Catinka shook her head gravely, and resumed her seat. "That thing I cannot say."

"But you were on the very spot where the murder took place."

"Yes," she admitted; "there I was. How you know?"

"By the rainbow feather you dropped."

"Pardon—it is wrong. I did not let fall the feather. I place him there for my reason."

"Place him where?" asked Mexton, adopting her grammatical error in his bewilderment.

"On the breast—oh, no—on the back of that dead lady."

"You saw the corpse?"

"Yes; I saw him."

"Then you know who killed the girl?"

"No; that I know not."

"Did Mr. Herne shoot Miss Lester?" asked Paul, determined to get a direct answer.

"I cannot say truly. I did not see."

"Did you fire the shot yourself?"

"I?" Catinka flashed a fiery glance at her questioner. "But what is this you would say? I did nothing to that lady. I killed her not. No! I swear it is so by all the saints!"

"But you know so much that——"

"What I know you will be told," interrupted Catin-

ka, "that is, my good sir, if you this moment will be silent and wait."

"I am quite at your disposal, mademoiselle," said Paul, and composed himself to listen to what could not fail to be an interesting and strange story.

"Good! that is so right," said Catinka, and resumed her seat. The light of the sun poured in through the high window, and enveloped the violinist in a haze of golden glory, so that she had to spread out the parti-coloured fan in order to shade her eyes from the glare. But she did not move out of that pool of heat and light, for it seemed to please her greatly, and she basked in the ardent rays like a cat. Paul never forgot that scene; the cheerful room, the bright sunshine, and the pretty woman who glowed and sparkled with southern vivacity in the radiance. She told a strange story, truly, and told it in the calmest of voices, so that long before she finished Paul concluded that Baldini was right when he declared Catinka had no heart. Here it will be best to set forth the tale in other words than her own, since her phraseology was foreign, and not always correct. The substance of what she related was as follows:—

"For you to understand what I tell you," she began slowly, "you must learn who I am and what are my aims. I have no reason to keep my desire secret in this free England of yours; but in Poland, in Russia—ah! there it would be a different matter. My name is Catinka Poluski, and I was born at Warsaw some twenty-five years ago. I am of a noble family, and my parents were much hated by the Russians for their patriotic desire to see a free Poland. They conspired

against the tyrant Czar when I was but a child, and being discovered they were arrested and sent to Siberia—sent there without a trial, to their doom! Ah! God! why dost Thou permit such evils to befall noble hearts.”

“Are your parents still alive?” asked Paul when she ceased for a moment, to conquer her emotion.

“Dead, Mr. Mexton,” replied Catinka, in a low voice, “dead these many years. I was left alone in the world, to the care of an old servant. Our estates were confiscated by the tyrant, and there remained nothing to me but poverty and shame, and a heritage of hatred against those who sent the noble Poluski and his wife to their graves in cruel Siberia, but that Luzk saved me.”

“Luzk!” repeated Mexton, struck by the peculiar name, “and who was Luzk?”

“The servant I spoke of,” said Catinka, with emotion, “the faithful man who looked after me when I was a helpless orphan. He came from the town of Luzk, and took the name, for some reason connected with the troubles of our unhappy land. It was Luzk who worked for me, who clothed and fed me, and had me educated. By him I was taught the violin, for which I had always a great love, and I soon was able to play very well.”

“You play like an angel!” said Paul, with enthusiasm.

“I did not know angels played on fiddles!” replied the girl, smiling. “However, I thank you for the compliment. It is fortunate that I play well, for when Luzk died, seven years ago, I had no one to look after



me. I thought I should starve, as my name was proscribed, and no one dared to help the child of Poluski, the rebel. Then a French musician heard me playing in the streets of Warsaw—yes, you may look, Mr. Mexton, but I, Catinka Poluski, of the best blood in Poland, have played in the streets. This man—his name was Dubourg—heard me, and took me into his care. He was old, and a very fine player on the violin. I received lessons from him for many months, and then we went to Paris, where I appeared. I made a name, and so I was able to earn an income. I stayed in Paris for a long time. Then good Papa Dubourg died, and I no longer cared to remain. I came to London; I played; I was liked; and now, as you know, I can earn as much money as I want by my talent. It is not an ignoble profession,” said Catinka, “and I do not think the dead Poluski race need be ashamed of their descendant.”

“I should think not, indeed, mademoiselle?” cried Paul. “You have overcome your difficulties in a noble manner. But this,” he added, “does not touch on your society.”

“I am coming to that,” said Catinka, with a nod; “but, as I told you, it was necessary for your understanding that I should begin from the beginning. Well, Mr. Mexton, when I found myself at ease in London, I determined to do what I could to aid my unhappy country to be free. As a child of the Poluski I was bound to revenge my parents and free Poland. Then in my brain there arose the idea of the Society of the Rainbow Feather.”

"Is the name symbolical?" asked Paul, glancing at the fan, which she still held.

"Yes." Catinka spread out the fan before him. "This is made of feathers—a sign that we shall rise, since birds that fly wear plumage. The feathers are dyed red, blue, green and yellow, which are symbolic colours. Red for the war we must wage to free our land; blue is a sign of the peace which will follow the war; green, the colour of hope which we need to inspire us; and yellow for the wealth we require to further our plans."

"I see," said Paul, coolly; "yellow stands for Darcy Herne, whose wealth you need."

"Precisely," replied Catinka calmly. "You are very clever, my dear Mr. Mexton, to guess so well as that. Do you think I am in love with Mr. Herne?—by no means, sir! It is his money-bags I want. I have but one heart and that is for no man; the love which fills it is the love of Poland—of my crushed and fallen country. The saints grant that it may be my hand to raise it from the dust!"

"Not an easy task," said Mexton, with a discouraging glance.

"Great tasks are never easy," declared Catinka, with the fire of heroism in her eyes; "but do you not think I had better go on with my story?"

"I should be obliged, mademoiselle. Remember, we have not got yet to the part which will interest me most."

"It is coming," said the violinist. "Well, Mr. Mexton, I formed my society, as I say, with the Rainbow Feather as a symbol of its meaning. My first recruits

were exiled Poles and Russians, who had all the will, but none of the power, to harm the tyrant."

"The Czar?"

"I call him the tyrant. But these recruits had no money, and without money I could not hope to forward the cause. Then God, who is against oppression, sent in my way Mr. Herne. I met him—well, never mind how; but he became acquainted with me, and he came to the meetings of my society, in this very room. I found out that he had all sympathy with the oppressed, and so he was willing to aid me to lift the foreign yoke from the necks of my countrymen. I looked on him as my own, as a man vowed to my service, until I learnt from Mr. Lovel that he was engaged to be married."

"Do you know Mr. Lovel?"

"Very well," replied Catinka quietly. "I have known him for two years, and he feigned to be in love with me. But it was only a passing fancy, and he left London, to fall in love with your Milly Lester. But Herne was engaged to that lady, and out of jealousy Lovel told me of the engagement. I was angry, for I thought that she would lead Mr. Herne away from me, and that his money and his enthusiasm would be lost to the cause. Later on Mr. Herne received letters from your Barnstead, which assured him that Miss Lester was flirting and making play, as you may say, with Mr. Lovel. He grew jealous, and the day before the murder, when he received a letter stating that Miss Lester was to meet Mr. Lovel, he determined to go down for himself and see if she was faithless."

"Who wrote those letters?" asked Paul, eagerly.

"I cannot tell you that," replied the Pole, shaking her head. "They were scribbled on very dirty paper, and in an illegible hand—at least, almost illegible. I saw only two."

"Did Mr. Herne know who wrote them?"

"He told me he had no idea," said Catinka, cautiously; "but this I know not. They were sent to his town address in Berkeley Square."

"Yes; I know he has a house there," said Paul, in thoughtful tones. "How came you to see those letters, Catinka?"

"Mr. Herne showed the last two to me when I reproached him with leaving London instead of attending to a meeting of our society. He said that he must go down on that Sunday night and assure himself that the reports were false."

"Did he believe them?"

"I think he did," said Catinka, promptly. "He said that Miss Lester was young and thoughtless, and might be led astray by the evil mind of Mr. Lovel. He wanted to save her from destruction, and talked in quite a religious way about her."

"I know," said Paul, quietly. "Herne is a fanatic. So he went down on that Sunday night?"

"By the train at four o'clock in the afternoon. I followed."

"Why did you follow?"

"Because I desired to see this girl," replied Catinka, coolly. "You see, Mr. Mexton, I did not wish to lose Mr. Herne, because I wanted his money for my society; so I thought I would see what this girl was like—if she was as lovely as he declared her to be. And

again, I wished to see Mr. Lovel, and get him to marry the girl, so that I could have this dear Herne to myself."

"But you were not in love with Herne!"

"No; but to secure him and his money to my cause, I would have married him. I quite intended to do so, and went to Barnstead that I might behold my rival; to see, you understand, if I had much to fear from her."

"Did you go down by the same train?"

"Oh, yes; at four o'clock. I was in a third-class carriage, Mr. Herne in a first. He did not see me. We got to Marborough a little after five. Then I lost him; but as I knew he was going to Barnstead that was no matter. I hired a carriage and drove over to Barnstead, where I had dinner in that hotel called after Mr. Herne."

"The Herne Arms."

"Yes. They gave me a bad dinner," said Catinka, making a face. "After that I went to church, where I thought I might see the girl. I did see her."

"How did you know her?"

"She was pointed out to me when I asked a lady, who sat near me. I saw Mr. Lovel look at her also. She was beautiful, but foolish. I saw her leave the church, but I waited till the end of the service, and then I went out after Mr. Lovel, as I desired to speak with him."

"Did you?"

"No. I could not find him when I went out, and as I did not know your village I was not aware where to go. I wandered about, and quite lost myself for a long

time. When I was on a wide plain I heard a shot, and I ran forward into a wood to see what was the matter. It took me some time to find the place where the shot had been fired; but when I did find it, no living person was there."

"But a dead body was?"

"Yes," assented Catinka—"the body of Miss Lester, whom I had seen in church. I was alarmed, and thought that I might get into trouble if I were found with the dead body. I do not know your laws, so I ran away. But before I went," said the Pole, with emphasis, "I placed on the body—it was lying face downward—the symbol of my society, a rainbow feather."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### IRIS CONFESSES.

PAUL received this confession in silence, then said: "May I ask why you placed a rainbow feather on the body?"

"For reason particular, Mr. Critic," replied Catinka, calmly. "I wished this good Herne to join my society, and give of his money. If not joining freely, I willed that he should be forced to, for his safety. See you, I gave him a rainbow feather, and such a one was found by the dead. Then, you conceive, I could swear I never put it on the body, and Mr. Herne alone could have done it, since no one but he could have a feather like that in Barnstead. So you see"—Catinka shrugged her shoulders—"he would be called the murderer if I spoke. When he came to me I tell him all this, and vow to speak if he gives me not the money."

"A kind of blackmailing," said Paul, wondering at the shameless way in which she spoke. "And what did Mr. Herne say to this?"

"Oh, he will give me a reply when the trial of the caught man is done."

"Dr. Lester?"

"Yes; the father of the dead lady."

"But you know Lester is innocent?"

"Eh! that may be so," replied Catinka, with another shrug; "but how is it that I should know?"

"Because you must be aware who fired the shot."

"But no, Mr. Mexton; I tell you no! I hear the shot; I run forward; I see no one; not Mr. Lovel, not the good Herne. No one person do I see. I put the feather on the body, and run away, in case they say I kill the lady. I get into my carriage at the inn, and go back to Marborough; then to London in the railway."

"Did you see Mr. Herne at Barnstead at all?"

"No. I saw him at Marborough at the railway; then never again."

"Do you think he killed the girl?"

"I know not. He says not."

"He'd say anything to save his own neck," rejoined Paul, scornfully. "Was he in disguise when he went to Barnstead?"

"Not that I know; but he had a long coat for the rain, and there was no rain. Also a white scarf on his neck; not like the dress of a gentleman."

"I see. A disguise. He did not want to be known in Barnstead."

Catinka made a gesture of indifference. "I know nothing of that," she said. "I have told you all."

"You have," said Paul slowly, "and very fully. What is to prevent my telling your pretty plot about the rainbow feather?"

"I care not. If this good Herne is free, he will give me the money, since the lady is dead; if you speak, and he is killed by the law—well, he makes a will, and I



get his money. It is all so; if I had been afraid, Mr. Mexton, I should have said not one word. But you see it is all right. I will get money to help my country."

Paul rose and took up his hat and cane. He was so disgusted with the way in which she spoke that he wished to leave her as speedily as possible. "I bid you good-day, mademoiselle," he said, marching towards the door. "And allow me to tell you that I consider you a wicked woman."

"Ah," Catinka shrugged her shoulders—"now you know all, you call me bad names. You are ungrateful—you. But what care I?—not that!" and she snapped her fingers.

"You are shameless."

"Bah! bah! bah! Go away, you pig of an Englishman!" and Paul felt that there was nothing for him but to accept this advice. Without further words he walked out of the room, pursued by the scornful laughter of Catinka. Whatever love he might have felt for her beauty was killed by her confession and cruel mirth. When Mexton left Bloomsbury Square he was quite cured of his passion.

On his way back to Marlborough Paul had a carriage all to himself, and he had both time and solitude to consider what use he should make of Catinka's statement. It would seem from what she had told him that Herne was implicated in the murder—perhaps had committed the deed himself. Paul was well aware of Herne's temperament; it was that of a fanatic who regarded bodies less than souls; who would slay the one to save the other. He was of the same nature

as Torquemada of Spain. If Herne fancied that Milly was likely to go astray with the too fascinating Lovel, the journalist was quite sure that he would have had no hesitation in killing the girl and would glorify himself for the deed. Catinka had said that the anonymous letters had made Herne jealous; but with this view Paul did not agree. If Herne had shot Milly Lester he had done the deed with the pitiless zeal of a fanatic.

"I only wonder that he did not proclaim his doings to all Barnstead," mused Paul. "If he fancied in his fanaticism that he was justified in killing the girl he would certainly not hesitate to acknowledge his guilt; he would not let an innocent man suffer for his crime—though, to be sure, if he killed Milly, he did not regard the deed as a crime. His silence is the sole argument in favour of his innocence."

And, indeed, if Herne were not guilty how could he explain his stealthy visit to Barnstead, his going thither in disguise, and his silence regarding his presence in the village on the night of the murder? No doubt he had come by stealth, lest Milly, hearing that he was back, should have refused to meet Lovel, and so have hidden her flirtation from the eyes of her future husband. There was no doubt, again, that Herne had been in the village on the night of the murder, since after receipt of the anonymous letters, he would hardly have remained ignorant at Marborough; but, on the other hand, there was no proof that he had been in the Winding Lane. Brent had seen Miss Clyde, but not Herne. Iris, on going to the spot after the crime, had beheld Lovel, but not Herne; and in no way had

the fact of Herne's presence at Barnstead come out in the evidence collected by Drek. But for the evidence of Catinka—which seemed genuine enough—it would be impossible in any way to implicate Darcy Herne in the crime.

After considerable thought Paul determined to seek out and question Lovel. That young man, on the evidence of Miss Clyde and Brent, had been with Milly almost at the hour of the murder. This was the more probable as, terrified lest he should be accused, Lovel had induced Gran Jimboy to tell a lie on his behalf. Mexton considered himself absolved from the promise he had made to Herne, since Catinka's statement had implicated the squire in the crime. He therefore arranged in his own mind to force a confession from Lovel, and threaten him with arrest should he prove obdurate. Paul knew very well that if he told all he knew to Drek there would not be much difficulty in having Lovel arrested on suspicion. The very fact of the lying alibi—which could be exposed by Brent and Miss Clyde—would be sufficient to get him into trouble since, if he were innocent, there would have been no need for him to resort to such extreme measures for his safety.

On considering all that he had been told by various people, Paul concluded that either Lovel or Herne was the guilty person, but which one of the two had shot the hapless girl it was hard to say. Only the discovery of new evidence could confirm the guilt of the one and the innocence of the other. And it was with the discovery of such evidence that Paul charged himself. From thoughts of the crime Mexton drifted into

considering his disillusion with regard to the Polish violinist. At one time he had loved her for her brilliant beauty, and had thought her kind-hearted and sympathetic. But the conversation he had taken part in; the shameless way in which she confessed to black-mailing Herne; and her absolute disregard of all honour, and even common honesty, showed him what sort of woman she was. If Herne were a religious fanatic, Catinka was frenzied on the point of patriotism; and for her mission she was willing to sacrifice all who stood in the way of its fulfilment. Paul quite believed that she had not killed Milly; but, short of murder, he fancied that she was capable of all other crimes in order to accomplish her dreams of a free Poland.

"How could I have loved such a woman?" groaned Paul. "But then it was an ideal I loved, not the kind of viperish clay Catinka has proved herself to be. I dreamt of a goddess, and find a hard woman of the world. Whatever love I may have felt for her has vanished; and I am now much more attracted by the plain good sense and kindly heart of Iris than by the beauty of that impossible Pole. And, after all," added Mex-ton, trying to comfort himself, "even if Catinka had proved the reality of my dream, she would never have surrendered her great schemes to marry me. But Iris!—ah, if I could only induce her to love me, then, indeed, in a union with her might I hope for happiness?"

It was six o'clock when Mex-ton arrived at Mar-borough, and after dining at home he returned to his work in the office. But all the time he was compiling political articles, and chronicling the small beer of the provincial town, his thoughts were with Iris Link; and

with the enthusiasm of youth he was rapidly raising an altar to his goddess. Catinka had been his Rosalind, he told himself, but Iris was his Juliet; and this modern Romeo was falling in love as quickly as his prototype of Verona. He longed for the company of Iris as a thirsty traveller for a cooling spring; and after a restless night, haunted by dreams of Iris and memories of poor dead Milly, he rode the next morning to Barnstead. Here he put up his horse at The Herne Arms, and promised himself a long day with the new goddess of his affections.

On her side, Iris had been thinking a great deal about Paul. The glance he had given her at parting had turned her thoughts in his direction, and she began to look on him in a more amiable light than she had hitherto done. Her love for Herne had completely died away since the death of Milly, and she now began to compare Mexton to the disadvantage of the squire. The conduct of the latter in regard to the discovery of the assassin of Milly had not prepossessed her in his favour; and she contrasted his lukewarm pursuit with the fiery zeal of Paul. The friend of her youth seemed noble in comparison to Herne, and Iris reproached herself for having overlooked for so long his many good qualities. In fact, she thought of Paul as much as he dreamt of her, and when she saw him at the front door of Poverty Villa she went out to meet him with a becoming blush. Paul, on his part, blushed also; and they met like lovers after a long separation. Thus out of evil had come good; and a happy marriage between two young people eminently suited to one another was likely to be the outcome

of poor Milly Lester's untimely decease. So strange and unexpected are the decrees of Fate.

"I am glad to see you again, Iris," said Paul, taking her hand and looking into her eyes. "How is your step-father?"

"Very well; he is cheerful and hopeful," replied Iris. "Miss Clyde has told her story to everyone, and now all Barnstead knows that he is innocent. There is quite a revulsion in his favour; and all yesterday he was being congratulated. I should not be surprised if this false accusation brought him more patients."

"Out of evil comes good," quoth Mexton, following her into the house. "Where is Dr. Lester now?"

"He has gone out to see his patients.

"Sober, I hope?"

"Paul!" Iris turned round indignantly. "You may be sure he is sober! He has not touched alcohol since he came back. Miss Clyde's lesson was cruel, but efficacious; I don't think he will ever indulge in strong drink again. But we can talk of his reform later," added Iris, as they sat down in the drawing-room. "I am anxious to know how you got on with Catinka."

"Well, I found out a great deal."

"You did?" said Iris; and then added, with a blush: "And did you find her as charming as you expected?"

"Indeed I did not! I found that my idol had feet of clay, and she has tumbled off her pedestal forever. A hard, cruel woman, Iris; not at all the woman of my dreams."

"I am glad you found out your mistake before it was too late," said Iris in a contented tone. "I am sure she would never have made you happy."

"I am sure also," rejoined Mexton, laughing. "I must look for my happiness nearer home." He said this with such a significant look that the colour again flushed the face of Iris; but, not deeming the moment a propitious one for love-making—since she was not yet sure of her own heart—she hurriedly turned the conversation.

"What did Catinka tell you, Paul?"

"Many things," replied Mexton; then, after a pause, he added: "Iris, I remember you asked me not to search for the assassin. Was that because you wished to save your father?"

"No; that was not my reason," said Iris in a hesitating tone. "I told you so before."

"Then you did not want Lovel to be arrested?"

"I did not care if he was arrested or not. I am not sure if he is guilty, although I did see him in the Winding Lane when I went out after poor Milly's body was brought home."

"Did you see anyone else near the spot?"

"No," said Iris frankly; "I did not. Why do you ask?"

"Because I am sure you suspect someone of having been there."

"I do; but—but I cannot tell you whom I suspect."

"You need not; I know. Catinka told me that Darcy Herne was in Barnstead on the night of the murder."

"He was there, then?" cried Iris, rising with an expression of horror.

"Where?"

"In the Winding Lane."

"I don't know. Why do you say so?"

"Wait." Iris left the room, and while Paul was still wondering at her emotion she returned with a handkerchief spotted with blood. This she handed to Paul. "Mr. Hérne's handkerchief," she said. "I found it on the spot where Milly's body was discovered."



## CHAPTER XIX.

### WHO MR. LOVEL WAS.

"THEN Herne must be guilty!" cried Paul, looking at the name on the handkerchief.

"I am not sure," replied Iris. "If he were guilty, he would not accuse Mr. Lovel."

"He was forced into that position," rejoined the journalist quickly. "He accused Lovel until the discovery of the rainbow feather led him to believe that Catinka had been on the spot, and might have seen him commit the crime. Then he changed his tune, and asked me to seek no further evidence against Lovel until he returned from seeing Catinka. I know now that the violinist saw nothing, and, reassured on that point, I am certain that Herne will return here to-morrow, and go on accusing Lovel."

"But, Paul," urged Iris, "he might have seen Lovel kill Milly?"

"No; if he had done so, he would have had Lovel arrested. Iris, this handkerchief shows that Herne was in the Winding Lane on the night and at the time of the murder. He came to Barnstead in disguise; and, see, this handkerchief is spotted with blood—with

Milly's blood. I feel sure that Herne is the guilty man."

Iris covered her face with her hands and shuddered. "Oh!" she moaned, "I have tried to put this frightful suspicion out of my mind, because I loved the man. I fancied that he might have killed Milly in a fit of rage, and it was because I was sorry for him that I asked you not to search for the assassin."

"You thought I should find Herne?"

"Yes; but I could not believe him guilty. When I heard of Mr. Lovel's false alibi at the inquest I truly believed that he had killed Milly."

"But, Iris," expostulated Paul, "the handkerchief is spotted with blood!"

"I know. Perhaps Mr. Herne let it fall when he found the body."

"If so, and he found the body, why did he not call in the police? Why did he sneak away to London in disguise, and let Mr. Chaskin bring home the corpse? No, Iris; I believe that Herne killed Milly. Only one man can tell us the truth, and the truth he must tell to save his own neck. I shall see Lovel."

"Do you think he will accuse Mr. Herne?" faltered Iris.

"My dear, I don't know," replied Paul, rising; "his own conduct is quite as mysterious as that of Herne. All I do know is that both of them were lurking about the spot at the time the shot was fired, and that one of the two must have fired it. I suspect Herne, but I shall do nothing against him at present."

"Don't say anything to Drek until you see Mr. Herne."

"No, I shall not," promised Paul; "but Herne does not return till to-morrow, and in the meantime I shall interview Lovel. His evidence may either clear or inculpate Herne."

"I can't believe Mr. Herne is guilty!" cried Iris in despair.

"Ah," said Paul, looking at her with a frown, "that is because you love him."

"No, no! I did love him, but now I do not care for him save as a friend; and for such friendship's sake I should be sorry to see him convicted of a crime which he may not have committed."

"Well. I'll say nothing against him until I see Lovel. This very moment I'll go to The Herne Arms and question him."

"Do, do; and come back to tell me if he can prove the innocence of Mr. Herne."

"I suspect he'll have enough to do to prove his own," said Paul grimly; and forthwith left the house on his errand. With him he carried the incriminating handkerchief, which Iris had forgotten to ask for back again.

On his way to the inn Paul wondered why he had not adopted before the very obvious course of questioning Lovel. He should have gone to him after Brent's confession of the false alibi and have forced the young man to explain why he and the old gipsy had perjured themselves at the inquest; but on further reflection Paul recollected that circumstances had intervened which had made it impossible to seek the interview with Lovell. But now all obstacles had been removed; he had accumulated from Brent, Miss Clyde,

Catinka and others a mass of circumstantial evidence; and at the coming conversation he was fully prepared to encounter any further deceptions which Lovel might employ to evade discovery. Paul did not believe that Lovel was guilty, as even the passion of jealousy would hardly have incited him to slay the girl who loved and trusted him; but he was certain that Lovel knew the name of the assassin; and he was equally certain that such name would be Darcy Herne.

At the inn Mexton learnt that Lovel was in his sitting-room, and at once he sent up his card with a request for an interview. He had a fancy that Lovel, for obvious reasons, would refuse to see him; but, rather to his surprise, he was requested to walk upstairs. When the servant closed the door behind him Paul found himself in a comfortable apartment, alone with the man who, as he believed, held in his hands the sole clue to the mysterious death of Milly. Lucas looked worn and ill; there were dark circles under his eyes, and he appeared listless and indifferent, as though his vitality was exhausted. Without offering his hand to Mexton, he bowed and pushed forward a chair.

"Hast thou found me out, O my enemy?" he said softly.

Mexton stared, as well he might, for the Biblical quotation was a strange one for Lovel to use. Paul thought it rather theatrical. "I am not your enemy, Mr. Lovel," he said, taking his seat. "I think you know that very well."

"How should I know, when Brent tells me that you go to him to worm out my secrets?"

"As to that," replied Paul coldly, "I have a right

to discover any secrets which are likely to lead to the detection of Milly's assassin."

"And you think I am the man?" questioned Lovel, looking fixedly at his visitor.

"No; I do not think you killed the poor girl. I will give you the credit that you loved her too well to take her young life. But I think also," said Paul with energy, "that you know who fired the shot."

"No; I am as doubtful of that as you are."

"I decline to believe that. Herne killed the girl, and you know it."

"So far as I do know, Herne did not kill the girl," replied Lovel emphatically.

"Then, if he is innocent, and you also, who is the murderer?"

"I don't know, I cannot say," said Lucas wearily. "I have asked myself that question fifty times a day, but to it I can find no answer."

"The police might find an answer."

Lovel laughed. "The police might arrest me, and find their answer by getting me hanged," he said coolly.

"Well, Drek may arrest you yet," said Paul, raising his eyebrows. "You must be aware, Mr. Lovel, that your actions are very suspicious."

"Because I told a lie to screen myself from possible danger?"

"Yes; and because you induced Gran Jimboy to lie also. Though how you induced her to perjure herself I can't guess."

"I'll explain if you like," said Lovel coldly. "I see that I must tell the truth sooner or later, and I would

rather make you my father confessor than Drek. I run less risk of arrest, you see."

"I don't know, Lovel. If I think you guilty I shall certainly have you arrested."

"My good sir," cried Lovel with irony, "if I were guilty of murder I should have left this neighbourhood long ago! My staying here proves my innocence."

"I'll wait to hear your story before agreeing to that."

"Very good, Mexton. You shall hear my story, and in addition I will tell you all that took place in the Winding Lane on the night poor, dear Milly was killed. Then," added Lovel with emphasis, "you will be as puzzled as I am."

"Puzzled by what?"

"By the mystery of the case. Who killed Milly I can't tell you; and if I cannot no one else can."

"I don't understand—" began Paul, when Lovel cut him short.

"Do not let us waste any more time," he said impatiently. "Hear my confession, as you may call it, and judge for yourself." He paused, passed his hand across his forehead, and in a moment or so continued, "My name is Lucas Lovel, as you know, and I came down here some eight or ten months ago to sketch and paint. Who I am I knew no more than yourself until three weeks ago."

"About the time of the murder?" interjected Mexton.

"Yes," assented Lovel, bending his head. "There was a mystery about my birth. I did not know where I was born, or who were my father and mother. I

was brought up by an old maiden aunt in London, and she resolutely refused to tell me about my parentage. I was educated at an excellent school, and as I wished to be an artist I was sent to the studio of a celebrated painter to study. Afterwards I went abroad, to Paris and Rome, whence I was recalled two years ago by the death of my guardian. By her will I inherited her house in Clapham, and some two hundred pounds a year—enough to keep me from starving, but not enough to give me the luxuries of life. About a year ago I became acquainted with Catinka and her mad schemes for freeing Poland. At her house I met Herne."

"You met Herne?" echoed Paul, much interested.

"I did; and I thought he was as mad in his own way as Catinka was in hers. However, we became friends, and he asked me down to Barnstead. As you are aware, I stayed with him for some time; but we quarrelled because I admired Miss Lester too much, and I left his house to take up my abode in these rooms, where I have been since. It was my love for Milly which kept me here, in this dull neighbourhood."

"I know; but it would have been more honourable had you gone," said Mexton, reprovingly.

"Why—because the girl I loved was engaged to a religious lunatic?" cried Lovel, his pale face growing red with anger. "It was for that very reason I stayed. I was determined that beautiful Milly should not be sacrificed to that cold-blooded fanatic. Besides, she loved me, and but for the attraction of Herne's money she would have become my wife. I met her often, as

you know; and some wretch sent tales of these meetings to Herne."

"Do you know who wrote Herne those letters?" asked Paul eagerly.

No; if I did, I'd kick the person who sent them," said Lovel viciously. "I have no idea who was so cruel. Well, Mexton, while paying court to Milly, and urging her to break off the engagement with Herne, I met with old Mother Jimboy, the gipsy. She positively haunted my steps, and never saw me without speaking to me. I found her a great nuisance."

"Perhaps she wrote the anonymous letters," suggested Mexton, thinking of the dirty paper and the illegible handwriting as described by Catinka.

Lovel shook his head very decidedly. "No, my friend," he said, gravely. "Mother Jimboy did not write those letters, for a reason which you shall hear. She would do nothing to injure me; but, on the contrary, she would protect me as the apple of her eye. For my sake she told a lie at the inquest, so that I should not be suspected of a crime which I did not commit."

"She must have strong reason for this guardianship," said Mexton, surprised.

"A strong one," assented Lovel, nodding. "The reason of kinship, Mr. Mexton." He paused to give effect to his words. "That old gipsy is my grandmother."

"Your grandmother!" echoed Paul, curiously. "Are you, then, a gipsy?"

"On my father's side I am—half a Romany, half a Gorgio; but my looks are of the gipsy race. Can



you not see for yourself?" he said, turning his face to the light.

It was as he stated, for on looking at him keenly Paul beheld unmistakable traces of Romany blood—the oval face, swart and Oriental, the thin nose, the full red lips, and above all the peaked eyes, with the glazed look which reveals the true gipsy. Lovel looked like an Arab astray in the West; and would have suited the rich robes of the Oriental rather than the plain garb of an English gentleman. Paul instinctively felt that the young man spoke the truth. He was no Englishman; he was not even kin to the dark Spaniard or the swart Italian; he was of the gentle Romany, undeniably a gipsy.

"When did you discover that you were of gipsy blood?" asked Paul.

"I have told you," said Lovel quietly. "About three weeks ago. On the day before that fatal Sunday night I met Milly on the common, and she promised to meet me in the Winding Lane the next night, after service. Shortly before, Gran Jimboy had read Milly's hand, and prophesied that she would come by a violent death. I was angry with the old woman, and when Milly left me I went in search of Mother Jimboy to reprove her."

"How did she take your reproof?"

"By telling me that she was my grandmother. It appeared that her son, my father, who was a pure-blooded gipsy, had been a fine singer, and left the Romany tents for the stage. He sang also at private houses in London, and in one of them he met with my mother, who was an heiress in a small way. She

fell in love with the gipsy tenor, and ran off with him. They were married, and when I was born my mother died, and asked her husband to take me back to her sister; my father died also, and it was by my aunt—the old maid I spoke of—that I was brought up. Before I was six years of age my father was drowned while going to America; and as he had squandered all the money his wife brought him, I was left penniless. My aunt, who was angered by her sister's marriage, decided to tell me nothing, but gave me my father's name—Lovel is a gipsy name, you know—and left me her little money. So you see, Mr. Mex-ton, I am a gipsy."

"I see," said Paul, rather bored. "But what has all this family history to do with the murder?"

## CHAPTER XX.

### GRAN JIMBOY.

LOVEL flushed angrily at the ironical tone in which his visitor made his last remark, but kept his temper in a way wonderful for so passionate a man, and replied with all calmness: "As I told you before, Mr. Mexton, a few personal details about myself are necessary to make you understand my position; otherwise you will never comprehend how Mother Jimboy consented to perjure herself for my sake at the inquest."

"I beg your pardon," said Paul, feeling ashamed of his rude speech; "I should not have spoken as I did. Pray continue."

"When gran had related my family history," resumed Lovel, quietly, "she told me that she had come to Barnstead specially to watch over me. She knew that I was not rich, and having discovered—how, I know not—that Miss Clyde was in love with me, she implored me to marry that lady. I refused."

"Because of Milly?"

"Yes," assented Lovel, "because of Milly; and I told gran the cause of my refusal in plain words. She was angry with what she termed my folly, and said that if

I met Milly again the consequences might be fatal."

"Oh! she said that, did she?"

"Yes; but only to insist upon her foolish prophecy earlier in the day. As I told you, she declared that Milly would meet with a violent death, and she urged that such death might take place at our next meeting, so as to induce me not to see the girl again. In a word, Mexton, the artful old woman was trying to frighten me with false fire; and I replied to her warning by telling her that I was to meet Milly the next evening in the Winding Lane. Mother Jimboy warned me once more that evil might come of it——"

"Might come, or would come?" questioned Paul.

"Might come," replied Lovel. "I don't think she anticipated any evil, but simply tried to put me off the meeting with words of warning. Well, Mexton, of course I did not believe in the nonsense she talked, and laughed at her; whereat she left me in anger, and swore that I should have reason to remember her prophecy. God knows I have now!" added the young man, bitterly.

"H'm!" said Paul, thoughtfully. "Do you believe in palmistry, Lovel?"

"No," said the other, promptly; "in spite of my gipsy blood, I am no believer in the influence of star, or cards, or lines on the palm. Yet, in Milly's case, it is very strange that Gran Jimboy's prognostication of evil should come to pass."

"Bah! In my opinion she contributed to the fulfillment of her own prophecy."

"Mexton! surely you don't believe that a feeble old woman like gran killed Milly?"

"No, I do not," replied Paul, decisively; "but I believe that she brought about the death by her arts. Tell me when it was you saw her?"

"About three o'clock in the afternoon."

"Very good; then you told her of your intended meeting with Milly? No one else knew of that."

"No," said Lovel, thoughtfully. "I told only Gran Jimboy; but Milly might have informed her sister."

"That is improbable," said Paul, drily. "Milly knew well enough that her sister Iris did not approve of her flirtation with you, and assuredly would have stopped the meeting had she known of it. Or would have formed an inconvenient third at such a meeting," concluded Paul.

"Well, well," cried Lovel, impatiently, "assuming that my grandmother was the only person who knew that I was to meet Milly on that Sunday night—what then?"

"Simply this: that I firmly believe Gran Jimboy wrote the letter which brought Herne down to witness your meeting."

Lovel started from his seat in surprise. "How do you know Herne was there? I did not tell you that."

"No; but I know. You are aware that he saw your meeting."

"Yes; I saw him."

"You—saw—him!" repeated Paul, slowly.

"You confuse me!" said Lovel, impatiently, striding up and down the room. "I'll tell you how and where I saw Herne later. Just now inform me why you think Gran Jimboy wrote those letters?"

"Because I learnt from Catinka——"

"You have seen Catinka?" interrupted Lovel, stopping.

"Yes, yes! Allow me to proceed. She told me that the letters were written on dirty scraps of paper, by an uneducated person."

"But my grandmother would do nothing to harm me."

"My dear Lovel," said Paul, coolly, "no doubt by informing Herne of your meetings she thought that she was acting in your interests. Remember, she wanted you to marry Miss Clyde; well, if she could have got Herne to stop your meetings with Milly, she no doubt fancied you would cease loving the poor girl, and consent to make Miss Clyde your wife."

"Admitting that, what about the prophecy?"

"Oh, knowing that Milly was deceiving Herne, the old gipsy fancied she might take the law into her own hands, and kill her; hence the prophecy about a violent death."

"My dear Mexton, all this is pure theory."

"True. I am waiting to hear you state the facts of the case."

"You shall," said Lovel, resuming his seat. "And, pray, attention, please! You may be able to make more out of the matter than I. On that night I met Milly in the Winding Lane about a quarter past eight. We walked up to the stile at the end where the lane goes out into the common. While walking I saw Brent, and bribed him to say nothing."

"You paid him well," interjected Paul—"five pounds."

"I did not pay him at all on that night," replied

Lovel, gloomily, "but next day, after the murder. I told him that I was innocent, but in peril, and gave him five pounds, with the promise of more when he wanted it."

"You bribed him lest he should inculcate you in the murder?"

"That's about it," confessed Lovel. "But if Brent hadn't thought me innocent he would not have taken the money. I'll do him that justice."

"I think you do him too much justice," said Paul, coolly. "Brent is a scamp, and would accept your money even though it were blood-stained. Go on, please, Mr. Lovel."

"I was talking to Milly, standing by the stile," continued the young man, "and there I was telling her about Herne's flirtation with Catinka. Of course, I knew that there was no flirtation, but I wanted to make Milly jealous, so that she should break off the match with Herne and marry me. Well, while we were talking the clock in St. Dunstan's Church began to strike nine, and Milly, saying she must go home, stepped away a short distance. At that moment a shot was fired, and with a cry the poor girl fell. If you only knew what I felt when I saw her fall!" cried Lovel, clasping his hands. "I did not see from what direction the shot came, but bent over Milly. She moved a little, and then died."

"And you?" asked Mexton, who was following this narrative with intense interest.

"I rose from my knees when she was dead and rushed into the bushes to see who had killed her. I could see no one at first, but I heard the sound as if

some one was retreating. I followed quickly, and in the shadow of the trees some distance away I saw—Darcy Herne!”

“He had killed her!” cried Paul, rising.

“No,” denied Lovel, with vehemence; “he was in one of his trances. I expect he had seen me kissing Milly when we parted, and that the sight had excited his nervous system to such a degree that he went into the cataleptic state. I touched him, I shook him, I spoke in his ear; but all to no purpose; he was quite senseless, and blind to all external things. Then I became aware of my own peril, and was afraid lest I should be accused of killing Milly. I had met her; I was in love with her; and I saw that on all sides I was in danger of being accused of the crime. Mexton,” cried Lovel, “I was not master of myself; I felt like a madman, and rushed away. Where I went I don’t know; but when I grew calmer I found myself on the high road. Then I thought I would protect myself by an alibi, and swear that I had not met Milly. I went to Mother Jimboy’s tent and told her all. She said she would help me, and made me lie down. That is all I know of the crime, Mexton. I did not kill the girl, I swear; and I swear also that Herne is innocent.”

“Are you so sure of that?” said Paul doubtfully.

“Sure! Of course I am. The man was in a trance, and had no pistol in his hand.”

“It might have fallen,” suggested Paul.

“No; I looked before I went.”

“Why did you return after midnight?”

“Who told you that I returned?” asked Lovel, curiously.



"Iris Link. She thought that her step-father had committed the crime; and, to save him, she went to the spot to look for the pistol she fancied he might have dropped. But we know now that Miss Clyde took away his pistol before the crime was committed."

"I heard that story," said Lovel, thoughtfully; "but, of course, I never thought that Dr. Lester was guilty. Did Iris see me?"

"Yes; and you ran away?"

"I did," said Lovel, flushing. "I went to see if Herne was still there; and hearing footsteps—those of Iris, no doubt—I went away lest I should be implicated in the murder. What else could I do in such a position? Well, Mexton, I have told you all I know. What do you make of my story?"

Paul rose. "You come with me, Lovel, and see Mother Jimboy," said he, putting on his hat, "and we'll see what she knows of the matter."

"She knows nothing; she was not out of her tent."

"I am not so certain of that," said Mexton, quickly. "If she wrote those letters, as I suspect, I am certain she would go to see if Herne was watching you."

"She did not say so to me," replied, Lovel, rising in his turn; "but it may be as well to question her. I am as anxious to secure the assassin as you are. Let us go. I only hope that gran is well enough to speak."

"Is she ill?" asked Paul, as they left The Herne Arms.

"She had an accident yesterday—was run over by a baker's cart, and has suffered some internal injury. Dr. Lester saw her this morning."

"I have not seen him, so that is the first I have heard about the accident."

The two young men walked through the village, and turned off to the high road. The shortest way to gran's tent was through the Winding Lane and across the common; but for obvious reasons, connected with the memory of the dead, they were unwilling to pass the fatal spot where Milly had come by her timely end. They walked smartly along the high road, and when well on their way Paul produced and showed to Lucas the handkerchief of Herne found by Iris.

"It is spotted with blood, you see," he said earnestly; "that looks as though Herne had something to do with the murder."

"I dare say when he came out of his trance he examined the body," said Lucas, "and dropped the handkerchief in the blood—Milly's blood, poor girl! Ugh!" and he shuddered.

"We'll see what Herne says about it," said Paul, taking back the handkerchief. "I expect him back from London to-morrow."

"He believes me guilty, Mexton, and I quite see how. He saw me with Milly, and then fell into his trance. When he came out of it he discovered that I was gone and the girl dead. I don't wonder he suspects me."

"But, if so, why did he not raise the alarm on the moment?"

"Afraid to inculcate himself, no doubt," replied Lucas. "But here we are."

Mother Jimboy's tent stood on the verge of the com-

mon, all by itself. She was with none of her kinsfolk, and camped alone in quite a hermit fashion. Since her illness a long lean girl with sharp black eyes had come forward in some mysterious fashion to take charge of her, and it was this damsel who appeared round a corner of the tent when the young men approached. Evidently the girl knew Lovel, for she nodded to him in a familiar fashion and addressed him directly.

"Gran's better, rye," said she, "and wants to see you. I was just going for you."

"I wonder what she wants to see me about," speculated Lovel, as the girl lifted up the flap of the tent. "We'll soon learn. Come, Mexton!" and they crept into the dwelling of the old gipsy.

Gran was lying on the ground amid a pile of dingy blankets, over which was thrown a gaily striped quilt. Her face was leaner and more wrinkled than ever, and her eyes were sunken. Still, they glittered with intelligence, and she seemed to have all her faculties about her, as she bent forward and clutched the hand of her grandson.

"Eh, dearie, I be main glad to see 'ee, for sure. An' t'other rye—who be he?"

"I am Paul Mexton," said that gentleman, "and I have come with Mr. Lovel to hear what you have to say about the murder."

Gran began a cackling laugh, and choked in the middle of it. "Oh, 'tis gran as knows the pure truth o' that," she said, when her breath came back. "I wanted to tell mun to you, dearie, so that you may be cliver and save yourself."

"To me?" cried Lucas, bending forward. "Do you know who killed Milly?"

"Ees, for sure. I was at the stile when mun fired wi' pistol."

"Who fired the pistol?" asked Paul, much excited. "Herne?"

"No; nor Miss Clyde, nor Brent, nor my grandson here. Bend, dearie, and I'll whisper who killed the good maid."

Both men bent forward and held their breath.

"It was t'passon," said Gran Jimboy. "Master Chas-kin—'e killed t' lass!"

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE RETURN OF HERNE.

WHEN Gran Jimboy revealed her secret, she finished with a croaking laugh of triumph, and lay back breathless on her pillow. Her hearers remained silent, in sheer astonishment at the astounding statement which she had made, and which neither could believe. The old gipsy was irritated by this unspoken scepticism, and reiterated her charge.

"I ses that t' passon killed that gude maid!" she declared; upon which Paul found his tongue.

"It is impossible!" cried he indignantly. "How dare you bring a charge like that against Mr. Chaskin! What motive had he for killing an innocent girl?"

"Eh, dearie, he loved her. Iss, gran spakes trew."

"Chaskin loved Milly!" said Lovel, a colour rising in his swarthy face. "What are you talking about, gran? If he had loved Milly, she would have told me."

"The maid was no fule, dearie," replied Mother Jimboy with feeble sarcasm; "she played wi' all hearts, and tould not one o' the other. Did mun spake tu t' Squoire o' you, dearie? No. Nor did mun spake to you o' t' passon. Oh, dearie me, but yon maid was cliver, for sure!"

Gran spoke so positively that Lovel half-believed her, and stared with angry eyes at her cunning old face. His companion did not say a word, for it had just come into Paul's mind that Miss Clyde, learning the fact from the gossip of Mrs. Drass, had brought the same charge against Chaskin. Evidently it was true, and Milly had inveigled the Vicar into loving her, in the intervals of her flirtation with Lovel and her demure conversations with Herne. She was determined that all should minister to her vanity and love of admiration; and had so played off the three men, the one against the other, that not one of the three knew that she was flirting with his rival. Yet, as Paul considered, the Vicar must have occupied a different position, for he was aware that Milly was engaged to Herne, and must have known, what all the country gossips knew, that she was playing fast and loose with Lovel when her future husband's back was turned. Truly the village beauty had been a torch of destruction in her small way—a local Helen—and undeniably a foolish, wicked, vain creature, with only her beauty to recommend her. Cruel as the thought may seem, Mexton fancied that it was just as well she was dead and done with. Had she lived she would have contrived further mischief.

"Suppose we grant that Mr. Chaskin was in love with Miss Lester," said he, after a pause, "why should he kill her?"

"For pure jealousy," replied gran. "Ye don't think I spake trew? See ye here," and gran brought out a bundle from under the pillow. "I picked this up on the place where that poor maid was took."

Lovel undid the bundle rapidly, and there lay before him a neat silver-plated pistol, the weapon, as he knew without being told, with which Milly had been killed. As in the case of the incriminatory revolver of Dr. Lester, produced by Miss Clyde, there was a name on the butt. "Francis Chaskin" was the name.

"So he killed her, after all!" cried Lovel, and handed the weapon to Paul, with a fierce light in his eyes.

"Aye, aye; 'tis so," mumbled gran, wetting her dry lips. "I was at the stile when mun fired the pistol."

"Did you see him fire it?" asked Paul. "Did you see him kill the girl?"

"No," replied Mrs. Jimboy, "but I seed him on the common afore I came to the stile. He walked to the lane, an' I hears the shot. When I got to that stile, I see nothing but the dead maid. After I sees summat bright on the ground twinkle-twinkle in the moonlight. 'Twas yon pistol, dearie; an' I picked it up an' run back to my tent quick as my old legs could carry me."

"Did you think Chaskin was the murderer at that time?"

"No, dearie; only when I saw the name o' mun on the pistol. I told that gude maid that she would goo down to the grave."

"And you thought that Herne had killed her," said Paul, sternly. "Oh, you need not look so astonished, Mrs. Jimboy. I know you wrote a letter to Mr. Herne telling him that his promised wife was to meet Lovel on Sunday night."

"Ees," said gran, in a hard voice; "I wrote; 'twas I as brought mun down."

"You!" cried Lovel, aghast. "In heaven's name, why?"

"For your sweet sake, dearie," whimpered the old woman. "You be bone o' my bone an' flesh o' my flesh; an' you hev nowt o' goold, poor lamb! 'Tis my wish as you'd wed wi' Mistress Clyde, an' hev lands an' money. But that dead maid was witchly, and was drawin' your heart into the net o' mun. I thought as t'Squire, seeing her wickedness, would take her fro' you, for religion's sake, an' wed her, so it might be she'd tempt ye no more; an' he could save the soul o' mun fro' the burnin' pit."

"You are a wicked old woman," said Lovel, vehemently. "By bringing Herne down you brought about the death of Milly."

"No, dearie, no. 'Twas passon killed her. T' Squire did nowt, dear heart. For your good I told mun o' his maid's bad doings."

"Gran," said Paul—for Lovel was too angered to speak—"you prophesied a violent death to Miss Lester. Did you make that prophecy knowing that she would be killed within twenty-four hours?"

"Eh, dearie, I know'd not when she would be killed. But fair maids wi' fierce lovers had best be wary, an' I thought if t'Squire knew o' her wickedness, he might hev anger wi' her."

"In other words, you brought down Herne in the hope that he might fulfil your prophecy, and kill Milly," cried Lovel. "You are a wicked old Jezebel, and, blood or no blood, I shall have nothing to do with you!"

The old woman began to whimper and expostulate



with feeble energy; but her grandson would listen to no excuses. With an angry look at her, he crawled out of the tent, and walked hastily across the common, trying to get rid of his wrath by violent exercise. It was easily seen, as he considered, that gran had hoped for the death of Milly at the hands of Herne. That the squire had not killed her was due to the trance into which he had fallen while witnessing her fickleness; a trance which had rendered him incapable of inflicting punishment on the fair woman who had deceived him. Without doubt—judging from the evidence of the pistol—Chaskin had committed the crime; and finding Herne in the trance, had probably taken his handkerchief and dipped it into the blood, with the idea of saving himself and inculcating his friend. Lovel could not conceive how Chaskin could have known of the meeting, unless—

“Gran Jimboy again!” he cried, stopping short, as the idea struck him. “She told Chaskin, she excited his jealousy, and guided him to the spot. Failing Herne, she was determined that the parson should kill Milly, and so fulfil her evil words, I see it all! We have been puppets, and that infernal hag has pulled the strings to make us dance.”

While he was thus talking to himself, Paul came running up, and expostulated with Lovel for having left the tent so hurriedly. “Gran is a wicked old woman,” said he—“I admit that; and she has acted ill; but it is for your sake, Lovel, that she has done these things.”

“I know it, I know it! She wishes to force me into marriage with Miss Clyde. Marry that Amazon, with

her mannish ways and rough tongue! I'd rather die!—the more especially when I know that Milly was put out of the way to bring about the match," he concluded, biting his fingers.

"My dear fellow, you forget. Herne, brought down by that letter, did not kill Milly."

"No; but Chaskin did," replied Lucas wrathfully; "and I believe that gran told him of the meeting, and induced him to come to the place. However you put it, Mexton, that old wretch is responsible for the tragedy."

"Well," said Paul, as they resumed their walk, "that point will bear arguing. But now that we know the truth, what is to be done?"

"We must tell Drek, and have Chaskin arrested."

"Well, no; I don't think it is wise to do that. Let us call at the Vicarage, and give the man an opportunity of defending himself."

"He can make no defence, seeing that we hold the pistol with his name on it."

"My dear fellow," remonstrated Paul, "remember Herne's handkerchief. But for your evidence that he was in a trance, I should have believed him guilty."

"Chaskin does not fall into trances."

"I know that; but he may have some other defence. At all events, it is only just to give him a chance before making the affair public."

"As you please," said Lovel suddenly. "Let us go to the Vicarage at once. But Chaskin will only lie, and deny his guilt."

Chance had taken Lovel's steps across the common, for in his anger at Gran Jimboy's revelations he had

not perceived where he was going. Paul had followed him, and while talking they had unconsciously drawn near to the stile which divided the common from the Winding Lane. Only when they halted at the stile itself did they realise where they were; and in silence they looked at one another.

"Shall we return?" said Paul, in a low voice.

Lovel shook his head, with a frown on his face, and climbed over the stile. Paul followed, and they walked on towards the scene of the tragedy. On the very spot where Milly's dead body had lain a man was standing with folded arms. He looked up as the young men drew near, and they saw the face of Darcy Herne. It was sad and downcast, and he appeared to have been meditating on the tragic death of his promised wife.

"Herne!" cried Paul, halting in his amazement, "I thought you were in London!"

"So I was," replied the squire carelessly, "but I came down to-day instead of waiting till to-morrow. My business was finished, so there was no need for me to idle in town. How are you, Lovel?" he added abruptly, turning his eyes towards Lucas.

"I am as well as can be expected under the circumstances," replied Lovel gloomily; "but why do you pay me the compliment of asking after my health, Mr. Herne? Do you not regard me as the murderer of Miss Lester?"

"No," replied Herne quietly. "I did so once, but I have changed my mind."

"Since seeing Catinka?" questioned Paul, sharply.

"What do you know about Catinka?" asked Herne, just as sharply.

"I know all that she could tell me about the Rainbow Feather, and her visit to Barnstead."

"She told you about the Rainbow Feather?" repeated Herne. "And how did you trace her connection with the Rainbow Feather?"

"That is too long a story to tell," rejoined Mexton coolly; "but I got the clue on the day you found the Rainbow Feather on this very spot. Catinka placed it on the body."

"But Catinka did not commit the murder."

"I know that; nor did Lovel here."

"H'm!" said Herne, looking at the pair; "perhaps you suspect me of the crime?"

"What makes you think that?" asked Lovel.

"Because, if Mexton saw Catinka, she no doubt told him of my visit here on the night the murder was committed."

"Yes, she did tell me," admitted Paul.

"Then, as you know so much, I may as well tell you all," said Herne. "I received a letter by the last post on Saturday night telling me that Mr. Lovel was to meet Milly here on Sunday night. The letter was not signed, but I know who wrote it."

"So do I, Herne," said Lovel. "Gran Jimboy, the gipsy, wrote it. She learnt from me at three o'clock about the meeting, and wrote at once, so as to catch the London post."

"Why did she trouble to betray you?"

"For reasons I'll explain hereafter," replied Lovel.

"But what of your secret visit? It was jealousy which made you come down, no doubt?"

"No," replied Herne, coldly, a light coming into his eyes; "it was a desire to save Milly from the snare set by you."

"Thank you for your good opinion."

"Oh, you may sneer," said Herne, with energy; "but I know you are not a child of God. I fought against you for the soul of Milly, as angels fight against devils of the pit. I had rather she died than lived to be your wife, and lose her soul in worldly pleasures."

"All this is beside the question," sneered Lovel. "I want to know about your visit."

"I came down to Marborough in a kind of disguise," said Herne, dropping his religious tone for that of a man of the world—"that is, I muffled myself up so that my face could not be recognised. From a stable on the outskirts of Marborough I hired a horse and rode over to Barnstead. I left the horse at The Chequers, where I was not known, and came to this lane, where I watched, hidden behind yonder tree. I saw you, Lovel, come up with Milly; I saw you kiss; and such was my rage that before I could advance I fell into one of those trances to which I am subject. When I came to myself I was alone, and on the ground was the dead body of Milly. It was then, Lovel, that I thought you had killed the poor girl; but I could not prove your guilt because of my trance. Again, as I had come by stealth to Barnstead, I was afraid lest under the circumstances I should be accused of the

crime. Therefore I held my tongue about my presence here on that night."

"But you accused me!" said Lovel, bitterly.

"I do not accuse you now," replied Herne, coldly.

"And why?" retorted the young man, "Because you know that Chaskin is the assassin."

## CHAPTER XXII.

### A DENIAL.

SQUIRE HERNE stared blankly at Lovel, and burst out laughing. "Frank Chaskin!" said he; "my old friend, the murderer of my promised wife? You are mad to say so!"

"I am not mad, as you know very well, Mr. Herne. I daresay you came out of your trance on that night quickly enough to see Chaskin steal away from the scene of his crime?"

"I swear by all that I hold most sacred that I saw nothing of my friend on that night. I rode back to Marborough, and caught the night express to London, without speaking to anyone with whom I was acquainted. I have told you that I came hither in disguise; is it likely, I ask you, Mr. Lovel, that I would nullify that disguise by speaking to my dearest friend? Not only my second self, mark you," added Herne, haughtily, "but a priest of the English Church, to whom I could not without shame reveal my secret visit. I acted for a good object, no doubt, but the means I was forced to adopt were none the less distasteful. I deny that in any way I know that Frank Chaskin is guilty; and, what is more, gentlemen, I

would be prepared to stake my existence that he is innocent."

"I should like to agree with you, Mr. Herne," said Paul sadly, "but unfortunately I have here a proof of his guilt."

"Proof! What proof?"

"This pistol," said Paul, producing the weapon and handing it to Herne. "It was found by Mother Jimboy on this spot, on the night of the murder, and shortly after the committal of the crime. You will see that the Vicar's name is engraved on the butt."

Herne glanced carelessly at the pistol, and returned it to Mexton. "I have no need to see," he said sternly. "I recognise the pistol well enough. It is one of a pair which Chaskin had when he was in the army. It was found on this spot, you say. What of that?"

"Simply this," broke in Lovel, "that Chaskin must have dropped it after killing Milly."

"It does not argue that Chaskin was here at all," retorted Herne. "This pistol was no doubt stolen from his study, where he kept it. Mother Jimboy, you say—a gipsy, a thief. Why," he added, struck by a sudden thought, "she was in Chaskin's study a week before the murder! I remember quite well. No doubt she stole the pistol."

"And killed Milly, why don't you add?" sneered Lovel.

"Because I don't accuse her of so purposeless a crime. No doubt she gave the pistol to the murderer."

"Admitting that she did," cried Paul, "whom do you suspect?"



"No one," replied Herne. "Though I might suspect Lovel."

"Oh," said Lucas, shrugging his shoulders, "are you going over the old ground again?"

"No, I am not," replied Herne. "I say again that I do not suspect you."

"And I ask again why have you changed your mind?" said Lovel. "I was with Milly when you fell into your trance, and I was absent when you came out of it. So far as you knew, no one else was in the lane, and you awoke from your senseless state to see Milly's dead body. On these grounds you can suspect me only."

"You state a very good case against yourself," sneered Herne. "Evidently you wish to be hanged!"

"No, but I wish to hang the villain who killed Milly. I can defend myself if needful. But can you defend Chaskin?"

"I would do so with my life! He is innocent."

"I'll have to hear that from his own lips," replied Lovel. "Myself and Mexton are on our way to see him. Will you come also?"

"No; Chaskin can defend himself. I have just left him, and he said nothing which leads me to doubt him."

"The pistol—"

"No doubt he can explain the pistol. But go and ask him. For myself, I must bid you good-day. I have an engagement."

"One moment," cried Paul, catching him by the arm as he was moving off, "do you intend to abandon the search for Miss Lester's assassin?"

"No," replied Herne coldly. "I will find the assassin without your help."

"Because you know he is Chaskin!" cried Lovel scornfully.

"I do not know he is Chaskin!" retorted Herne disdainfully. "The person whom I suspect—whom I know—killed Milly is one you would never dream of accusing. Mine shall be the hand to bring this person to justice. Till then"—he waved his hand—"I have nothing to say," and with these final words he moved away.

Paul stood looking after him with a look of doubt on his face. "Whom do you think he suspects?" asked the journalist.

"I don't know."

"It can't be Dr. Lester, or Miss Clyde, for we have evidence that they are innocent," said Paul, perplexed, "nor you, because he denies that you are guilty; nor Chaskin, for the same reason; so—"

"I don't believe his denial of Chaskin's guilt," cried Lovel, with a frown; "nothing will make me believe that he did not kill Milly. Perhaps Herne suspects Catinka."

"Impossible! She cleared herself in my eyes."

"Well," said Lovel, dismissing the subject with a shrug, "let us see how the Rev. Mr. Chaskin intends to clear himself. He will find it hard to deny the evidence of that pistol."

Paul thought so also, but as his companion seemed indisposed for further conversation he held his peace. The two young men walked slowly through the Winding Lane, each intent on his own thoughts. Mexton

wondered on how many more people the blame of this tragic death was likely to fall. Lester, Miss Clyde, Lovel, Catinka, and Herne all had been suspected on sufficiently strong evidence; but on evidence equally strong the innocence of one and all had been clearly proved. Now the circumstantial evidence of the pistol was against Chaskin, and it would appear that he had killed the girl; but for all that Paul was not inclined to be certain of his guilt. Others had cleared themselves by reasonable explanation; so why should not Chaskin do the same? Mexton quite expected that the Vicar would be able to explain the loss of his pistol, and account in some plausible way for his meeting on the common with Mother Jimboy. And if he proved himself to be guiltless, it would be quite impossible—so far as Paul saw—to discover the assassin of Milly. Her fate would remain a tragic mystery; and the person who had wrought such ill would live on in defiance of the law. But though he—or she, for it might be a woman, thought Paul—escape the law of man, there was yet the law of God to be reckoned with. Come what might, the dastard who had fired the fatal shot would not escape punishment in the next world.

On their way to the square of St. Dunstan, where the Vicarage was situated, the young men met with Dr. Lester, who at once stopped to give them some news.

“I have just heard from Drek that my trial takes place next week,” he said eagerly, “and I must surrender to my bail. I shall be glad to get the thing

over, as, notwithstanding my innocence, I feel uneasy until I am pronounced guiltless."

"That need not trouble you," said Paul; "you assuredly will go free. We know now who committed the murder."

"Who was it? Who is the assassin?"

"I'll tell you that later on. Is Drek here?"

"Yes, he is at The Herne Arms."

"Then tell him to meet Lovel and myself there in an hour. We have something to tell him which is of the greatest importance."

"Is it the name of the assassin?"

"Yes," broke in Lovel fiercely, "it is the name of the assassin; and I hope I'll see him in gaol to-night. Where are you going now, doctor?" he asked abruptly.

"To see Mother Jimboy. She is ill, you know."

"Yes, I know," assented Lovel gloomily. "Will she die?"

"I hope not; but she is old, and should fever intervene, or inflammation be set up, I am afraid she will die."

"It may be well if she does," muttered Lovel to himself. "Good-bye, doctor. You shall know who killed Milly this very night."

When Lester took his departure, which he did very unwillingly, as he was anxious to know the truth, Paul and his companion went to the Vicarage, and without much difficulty were shown into the presence of Chas-kin. The Vicar happened to be at home at the moment, and saw them with apparent willingness; but Lovel, with jealous eyes, perceived that he changed colour when they entered. Also, his voice shook when

he asked them to be seated; and from these signs of emotion in the absence of any apparent cause Paul augured ill. For an innocent man Chaskin was strangely moved.

"We have come to see you on a very important matter, sir," said Paul.

"Yes," responded Chaskin, trying to preserve his calmness; "and about what?"

"Let me answer that question," said Lovel, before Paul could speak. "About the murder of Miss Lester."

"What about the murder, Mr. Lovel? Why do you come to me on such errand?"

"Because I think you can best answer our questions."

Chaskin rose suddenly from his chair, and commanded his voice with a powerful effort of will, but the perspiration beaded his brow as he spoke.

"What am I to understand by this speech, Mr. Lovel?"

"That you are the assassin of Milly Lester!"

"I—I!" gasped the Vicar, sitting down again, less by will than because he could no longer stand upright. "You dare to accuse me of this terrible crime! Mr. Mexton, is your friend mad?"

"No, Mr. Chaskin," replied Paul in sad tones. "I believe the same as he does."

"That I killed Miss Lester—I, who read the service over her coffin!"

"Yes," exclaimed both men together.

Chaskin passed his hand across his brow and

groaned. "This is some horrible dream," he said in an agitated voice. "You cannot be serious!"

"But we are serious," said Mexton, agitated also. "I would willingly believe you guiltless, sir, but what can I say—what can Lovel say—in the face of such evidence as this?"

"My pistol!" Chaskin took the weapon from Paul's hand, and looked at it in a startled way. "Yes, it is mine; my name is on it. Mr. Lovell! Mr. Mexton! how did you come by it?"

"I received it from Gran Jimboy," said Paul.

"And Gran Jimboy picked it up on the very spot where Milly's body was lying," added Lovel, "shortly after the shot was fired. How did it come there?"

By this time Chaskin was the colour of paper; but there was a certain dignity in his answer. "I cannot tell you, gentlemen," he replied. "I did not lose it in the Winding Lane."

"But it is your pistol," said Lovel with a scowl.

"It is; but I—I lost it over a month ago!"

"I thought you would try and get out of it in that way," scoffed Lucas. "A weak defence, truly!"

"I need make no defence," said Chaskin, haughtily. "I am innocent."

"Then how can you explain your presence on the common before nine o'clock of that night?"

"How do you know I was on the common?"

"Mother Jimboy says she met you."

"True." Chaskin again passed his hand across his face. "I did meet her. I was going to see a sick man on the other side of the common."

"Away from the village?"

"Yes. I went there and saw this man immediately after evening service. It was on my return about midnight that I found the body of that poor girl, and gave the alarm. But I stated all this at the inquest."

"I remember," said Paul, with a nod. "But Mrs. Jimboy declares that before nine o'clock you were going towards the Winding Lane, and—"

"She is making a mistake," interrupted the Vicar hurriedly. "I was going in the other direction."

"She denies that," said Lovel, sharply; "and it was shortly after she saw you go into the woods about the Winding Lane that she heard the shot."

"I did not fire it!" said Chaskin, emphatically; "and let me ask you, Mr. Lovel, if you were with Miss Lester on that night, at that hour?"

"I was," admitted Lovel. "I don't mind saying so, as I can prove my innocence."

"Then you must know who killed Miss Lester!"

"I do not. The shot was fired out of the darkness of the trees."

"Were you standing by the stile?"

"Yes; with Miss Lester."

"Then if I came towards that stile you must have seen me."

"I didn't see you, I admit," replied Lucas, somewhat disconcerted; "but if you are not guilty, Mr. Chaskin, you know who is."

"I can say neither one thing nor the other," said the Vicar; "if you think me guilty, you must do so."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### DREK'S OPINIONS.

THERE was a silence after this declaration of Chaskin's, for neither of the young men knew what reply to make. The Vicar did not affirm his innocence, as he had done earlier in the interview; nor did he accuse anyone else of committing the crime with which he was charged. He took up a purely negative attitude, and by doing so threw on Paul and Lovel the onus of proving their accusations. Nothing in the way of defence could have been more unsatisfactory. On seeing their hesitation Chaskin reiterated his speech.

"I do not repeat that I am innocent," he asserted. "If you think that I killed that unhappy girl, you must continue to do so. But," added the Vicar with irony, "I fail to see what motive you can ascribe to me for such an act."

"The motive of jealousy," said Lovel sullenly; "you were in love with Milly. Oh, you need not deny it, Mr. Chaskin; I know it for a fact."

"My friend," said Chaskin coldly, "I do not intend to deny it; but I question your right to make such a statement. It is true that I loved Miss Lester; but she never knew of my passion. She was the promised



wife of my friend, and as such I did not think myself justified in revealing my feelings. You, Mr. Lovel, were less scrupulous."

"I admit it," replied Lovel, attempting a weak defence; "but I loved her."

"All the village knew as much; but I do not call that love which debases its object. If you had said nothing to Miss Lester, she might have refused to meet you. And had she not met you," added Chaskin emphatically, "this tragedy would not have taken place."

"As to that, you know best!" sneered the younger man.

"As you please, sir," rejoined the Vicar. "I refuse to defend myself to you."

"Can you defend yourself at all?" questioned Mexton suddenly.

"I shall answer that question when I am asked it by the duly constituted authorities."

"At least tell us how you lost that pistol."

The Vicar rose from his chair, and walking across to a side table, lifted therefrom an oblong box of mahogany. This he opened and placed before his visitors.

"This is a remnant of my soldiering days," he said. "Once it contained two pistols; now, as you see, there is only one. The other, I admit freely, is the weapon which you showed to me, Mr. Mexton."

"The weapon with which Milly was murdered," said Lovel viciously.

"No doubt; but, as I told you, I lost it some four weeks ago."

"How did you lose it?" asked Paul; for it seemed to him that Chaskin was evading the point.

"I cannot tell you," replied the Vicar; "the box stood always on that table. I see many people in this room; any one of them might have taken it."

"Mother Jimboy, for instance?"

"No; for the simple reason that Mother Jimboy never came to the Vicarage."

"Herne says she did," cried Lovel; "and that you saw her in this room before the murder."

Chaskin drew a long breath, and seemed to consider his reply: "Mr. Herne is mistaken," he said at length; "the gipsy was never in this room."

"Then somebody is telling a lie!" said Lovel, looking sharply at Chaskin.

"No doubt," he answered coolly; "but I am not bound to find the liar for you."

"Perhaps I know where he is to be found without your aid!"

The Vicar shut down the lid of the box with a snap, and once more rose to his feet. "This conversation has lasted long enough," he said with dignity, "and I have replied to your questions very patiently. I refuse to answer any more."

"You say you are innocent?" asked Paul.

"I say nothing."

"You know who is guilty?" insisted Lovel.

"I know nothing."

This was all the answer they could obtain from Chaskin, so, seeing that it was useless to prolong the interview with so obstinate a man, Paul and his friend departed. Their visit had been productive of no good,

and—if Chaskin were guilty—they had only succeeding in putting him on his guard. But was he guilty? The two young men took different views of the question. Paul was inclined to side with the Vicar; while Lovel was equally bent on insisting that the Vicar was the assassin.

"If he has not killed Milly, he would declare that he was innocent," said he.

"He did so, when we first spoke to him. That is a point in his favour."

"I don't see it at all," said Lovel obstinately; "he did not know what evidence we could bring against him. When he knew, he took refuge in silence."

"Well," objected Paul, more just than his prejudiced companion, "if you remember, he denied that Mother Jimboy had stolen the pistol. If he were guilty, it is probable that he would seize on every chance to exculpate himself and inculpate others. The suggestion made by Herne would have been a good opportunity of shifting the blame from his own shoulders on to those of the gipsy; but, as you heard for yourself, Lovel, he declined to take advantage of the opening."

"Bah! that is his cunning. I daresay he has a defence all ready."

"If so, he did not entrust us with it," rejoined Mex-ton, a trifle drily.

"No; he's not such a fool as to show his hand unless forced to do so. Should Drek arrest him, he would have lies in plenty to prove his innocence."

"I don't think there is sufficient evidence to arrest him."

"Drek may think otherwise," replied Lovel, looking

at his watch. "Come to The Herne Arms, Mexton, for I expect the inspector will be waiting for us there. We will tell him of our interview with the Vicar, and see what his opinion is about the matter; I should not be surprised if Mr. Chaskin was in gaol by this evening."

"I should be very much surprised," said Paul emphatically. "As Lester is already accused of the crime, and is to stand his trial next week, Drek cannot arrest Chaskin as yet, however guilty he may think him. You can't have two people legally accused of the same crime. One must be proved innocent before the other can be imprisoned as suspected of guilt."

"As to these points of law, I know nothing about them," replied Lovel impatiently; "all I know is that to my mind Chaskin is the guilty person. The evidence of Gran Jimboy and the production of that pistol are sufficient to hang him. However, we shall see."

There was nothing more said at the moment, as the conversation threatened to become disagreeable, and the two men walked to The Herne Arms. Here they found Inspector Drek, who informed them that Lester had delivered the message, but could not be present at the interview, as he had been called out to see a patient some miles away, and did not expect to be back before six o'clock. However, he was at their disposal, and very anxious he was to know why they had sought the interview.

"Come up to my room, and I'll tell you," said Lucas, and led the way to his sanctum. Here he ordered cigars and whisky; and having made his friends and

himself comfortable, he related to Drek the story of his connection with Mrs. Jimboy, and his knowledge of what had taken place in the lane on that fatal night. All of which has been already set forth.

"I think it wise that you should know all this, Mr. Drek," he said, concluding, "as someone else may relate my history in a more or less distorted fashion; and I am, as I can see plainly, in too dangerous a position to trifle with the law. Now our friend Mex-ton here can tell you of his visit to London, and our visits to Mrs. Jimboy and Chaskin."

"Mr. Chaskin! the Vicar!" cried Drek, who in his interest had let his cigar go out. What has he to do with the matter."

"Let me explain," said Paul; and, in his turn, he told the inspector of his interview with Catinka, his discovery of the pistol in the gipsy tent, and finally the interview which, with Lovel, he had taken part in at the Vicarage. Drek, being thus in possession of all the evidence gathered by the pair, was in a position to deliver judgment. This, however, he found it difficult to do, as he was not a particularly clever man; and the multiplicity of facts with which he had now to deal somewhat bewildered his brain. However, he saw what was expected of him in his official capacity, and rising to the occasion, he did his best to grapple with the situation.

"If you will permit me, gentlemen," said he, taking a drink of whisky to freshen up his faculties, "I will recapitulate all that we have discovered—severally discovered—since the crime was committed. Then we can see against whom the evidence is strongest, and

perhaps learn thereby who killed the girl. But I confess," added Drek, with a downcast air, "that I am not very sanguine."

"Why not?" exclaimed Lucas, hotly. "There is plenty of evidence."

"That is the whole point, sir, there is too much evidence."

"Against Chaskin, I mean."

"And against Herne, also," observed Paul. "If the pistol found by Gran Jimboy incriminates Chaskin, no less does the blood-stained handkerchief point to the guilt of Herne."

"But Herne can't be guilty," protested Lucas, angrily. "I tell you he was in a trance when the shot was fired."

"After the shot was fired," corrected Mexton. "Remember, you did not see him until the girl was dead."

"He couldn't have fired the shot and then have fallen into a trance."

"Why not? The very act might excite his nerves to such a degree as to cause the trance. You know that these cataleptic states of Herne's are caused by violent emotion."

"But if he had fired the shot I should have found the pistol in his hand."

"He might have dropped it."

"No! I searched for it," said Lucas, obstinately, "and didn't find it."

"In your agitation you might have overlooked it," replied Paul as obstinately.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," cried Drek, intervening in the matter; "this discussion is unprofitable. You

may both be right, and both wrong. But we shall not arrive at any conclusion by such loose arguments. Let us begin at the beginning and state all the cases."

"What cases?" asked Lovel, abruptly.

"The cases against all those connected with the matter," said Drek. "Dr. Lester, Miss Clyde, this Polish violinist, yourself, Mr. Herne, and finally, Mr. Chas-kin. There is strong evidence against each."

"I daresay," retorted Lucas, tartly, ill pleased at his name being in the list; but such evidence has proved the most of us innocent. Dr. Lester, for instance."

"Well, sir, Dr. Lester; look at the case against him. He is very poor; he wished his daughter to marry Mr. Herne, and learnt that the marriage—important to him as the means of securing a rich son-in-law to pay his debts—is likely to be broken off by the young lady's flirtation with you. The doctor becomes mad with drink, and taking a pistol, starts out to kill you. He remains away all the night, and cannot account for his actions. In the interval his daughter is killed; so we may assume that, intending to shoot you, Mr. Lovel, he shot her."

"Quite so," said Paul, drily; "but all that evidence is nullified by Miss Clyde's statement."

"I know that," replied Drek, with coolness, "but failing Miss Clyde's statement the evidence is strong against Dr. Lester. But he is innocent, so he is out of the case. Now Miss Clyde: she is in love with Mr. Lovel, and is jealous of Miss Lester. She takes a loaded pistol off the doctor, and is lurking in the lane to see the meeting of the man she loves with the woman she hates. Here, then, we may say that out of

jealousy, and to get rid of a rival, Miss Clyde killed the girl."

"That evidence is rebutted by the fact that Miss Clyde could not have arrived home in time if she had killed Milly. Her hour of arrival at the farm can be proved by Mrs. Drass. Also, if Miss Clyde were guilty, she would not have produced that pistol."

"Very good," assented Drek, still imperturbable; "then we will strike out Miss Clyde also. Now, then, for Catinka. She wants Mr. Herne's money, and thinks she will lose it if he marries Miss Lester. To remove this obstacle, she comes down to Barnstead and kills the girl."

"Bosh!" said Lovel, rudely. "If she had killed Milly she would not have left the clue of the rainbow feather, whereby she could be traced. You can strike Catinka out of your list also, Mr. Inspector."

"Certainly," replied Drek, obligingly. "Catinka is innocent, although, as you see, the evidence against her is very strong. Now we come to you, Mr. Lovel."

"Oh," said that young man, ironically, "and how do you intend to prove my guilt?"

"I am not presuming your guilt," said the inspector. "I merely intend to state the evidence against you."

"I am all attention," said Lovel.

"Well, sir, to put it briefly, you love this girl; you are with her at the hour of the murder; you set up a false alibi; you do everything to bring suspicion of guilt on yourself."

"But I am innocent."

"We will presume so for the moment," replied the inspector, coolly; "but you must know, Mr. Lovel,



that beyond your bare word we have no proof that you did not kill the girl."

"Drek!" Lovel jumped to his feet with almost a shriek. "You don't say that I killed Milly?"

"Going by the evidence——"

"Hang the evidence! Isn't it stronger against Herene and Chaskin? Did you find my handkerchief, bloodstained? Did you discover a pistol with my name on it?"

"No; but some lawyers might say that you stole the pistol out of Chaskin's room to inculcate him in a projected crime; also, that you took Herne's handkerchief out of his pocket when he was in a trance, and dropped it into the blood to get evidence against him. Oh, I don't say that you are guilty, Mr. Lovel, but you must admit that the evidence is strong. You think that Mr. Chaskin killed the girl; Mexton here inclines to think that Mr. Herne is guilty; but the evidence against the two is no stronger than that against you. A lawyer could build up a powerful——"

"Stop! stop!" cried Lovel, sitting down. "Stop! You will make me believe that I killed the poor girl after all!"

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE TRIAL.

"You see," said Drek, complacently, "that it is quite easy to get up a case against you, Mr. Lovel; yet I feel convinced from your late actions that you are innocent. Therefore you will understand that I am inclined to doubt even the strong evidence you have obtained against Mr. Chaskin. He may be as guiltless as you are. The evidence against Herne is as strong; yet you think his hands are clean of blood. Why, then, should you suspect Chaskin so much?"

"He refused to explain the loss of the pistol."

"So far as that goes, he refused because he did not think either you or Mexton had any right to examine him. But if a person like myself, having authority——"

"Go and see him, Drek, and find out if he will confess to you!" said Paul, eagerly.

"No; I shall take no steps in the matter until this trial of Dr. Lester's is concluded."

"And in the meantime Chaskin will run away," said Lovel, bitterly.

"I don't think so," rejoined the inspector, nettled by the sneering tone of the young man, which cast a

reflection on his judgment. "The conduct of Mr. Chaskin does not augur that he intends to fly; and if he did, I would take means to prevent his flight."

"You will have him watched?"

"I will have both him and Herne watched."

"And what about Mother Jimboy, who is so important a witness in this case?" said Paul, suddenly; "she is seriously ill, and being so old it is not improbable that she may die at any moment."

"True," said Drek, thoughtfully. "You think of everything, Mexton. I'll have her deposition taken as soon as I learn that she is in danger. At the present moment Dr. Lester, who is in attendance on her, assures me that the chances of recovery are in her favour. Oh, you may trust me," concluded the inspector, rising, "I'll do my best to bring the assassin of Miss Lester to justice."

"Chaskin!" cried Lucas, emphatically.

"Or yourself, or Herne," retorted Drek, putting on his hat. "Don't forget my argument about the evidence, Mr. Lovel. Take my advice, and keep quiet until Lester is discharged; then we shall see what is to be done."

"Arrest me, I suppose!"

"Sir!" cried Drek, with indignation, "I am this much of an Arab, that did I intend to be your enemy, and act so traitorous a part, I should not have broken bread with you; in other words, I should have declined your whisky-and-soda and the very excellent cigar which I have just smoked."

"I beg your pardon, Drek; I take back my words. Good-day."

"Good-day, Mr. Lovel; good-day, Mr. Mexton. At present we know not what is before us," and Inspector Drek left the room with an air of great dignity. When the door was closed after him Lovel turned towards his friend.

"What do you think of the position now?" he asked.

"I think that we had better wait and see the outcome of Lester's trial."

"Bah! I know the outcome! He will be acquitted."

"Well," said Paul, who was tired of the discussion, "let us wait till he is acquitted, and then renew our search for the assassin."

"I say Chaskin—he is the assassin!"

"And I say, Herne. Time and opportunity will be needed to prove which of us is in the right," said Paul; after which the conversation concluded, and each of the young men went his different way. With their opinions so diametrically opposed to one another, they felt that continued companionship might result in a quarrel; and at the present stage of their acquaintance, and seeing that they were mutually interested in bringing to justice the assassin of Milly Lester, they were unwilling that a rupture should take place. Hence, they very wisely parted.

During the following week there was great excitement in Marborough. The Assizes were being held, and the Barnstead crime occupied the most prominent place in the list of cases which had been set down for trial. It was rumored that Lester was innocent, but at Marborough the precise way in which his innocence was to be proved was not known. In Barnstead itself, thanks to Miss Clyde and the indefatigable Mrs. Drass,

the inhabitants were better informed, and looked upon the coming trial as a mere farce for the discharging of Dr. Lester. But there was a new source of excitement in the village, as it was reported that Mr. Inspector Drek had found the assassin, and would have him condemned on the most irrefutable evidence. But the name of the accused was not given, and many were the surmises as to who the criminal might prove to be. Thanks to the discretion of Paul, Lovel, and Drek, not a word was breathed hinting that Mr. Chaskin had anything to do with the matter.

In the meantime the illness of Mother Jimboy took a bad turn, and it was evident that her days were numbered. Drek visited her, and she held to the story of Chaskin's guilt, but point blank refused to make any sworn deposition to that effect. Her obstinacy on this point led the inspector to believe that the old woman was lying, but for what purpose he could not conceive. Drek did all he could to force her to sign a confession, but in vain, and the day for Lester's trial arrived without the accomplishment of this object. Nevertheless Paul Mexton haunted the tent of the gipsy and loudly declared that he would not leave until she was dead or had signed a confession. So obstinate was he on this point that not even the trial could seduce him into Marborough, and the "Tory Times" had to employ another reporter in his place. For this kindness on the part of the editor, Mexton promised that the confession of Mother Jimboy should be published in that paper; when the country would be astonished. Paul did not know at the time how truly he spoke.

On the second day of the Assizes the trial of Dr. Lester came on. The court was crowded, and Iris, dressed in mourning, with a heavy veil over her face, was present, under the charge of Mrs. Mexton. She would rather have stayed away, but having been subpoenaed as a witness on behalf of the Crown, she was obliged to attend. Miss Clyde was also present, and with her Mrs. Drass. Indeed, the court was full, principally of Barnstead folk, who thought that they had a right to the best seats on account of the murder having taken place in their village. Lovel came in shortly before the trial began, and while standing in the crowd—for he did not wish to make himself prominent—he felt a light touch on his arm, and was surprised on turning to find himself face to face with the Polish violinist. She looked paler than usual, and more than a trifle anxious; but Lovel was quite unable to account for these signs of emotion.

"Catinka!" he said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I came down to see the trial," she replied. "I saw the body of the poor girl, and I desire to behold the wicked murder man."

"You won't see him here, then. No one knows who killed Miss Lester."

"But this doctor——"

"Is innocent," interrupted Lovel. "The trial is a mere farce. When Dr. Lester is discharged we must look for the real assassin. Can you help us?"

"I, my dear?" Catinka shrugged her shoulders. "No; I told to that good Mexton all that I know. Where is he?"

"At Barnstead—on business."

"And my good friend, Mr. Herne?"

"Yonder he is, standing beside that clergyman."

"The priest? And who is that priest?"

"Mr. Chaskin, the Vicar of Barnstead."

"He is a ver' handsome man," said Catinka, calmly.

"Hush, Mistar Lovel; we will listen to what they say. Lester is in his place, and his lawyer talks."

"No, no; that is counsel for the Crown."

"Ah; but, my friend, it is no matter, no matter at all."

To this speech Lovel made no reply, as he was listening intently to the opening speech of the counsel for the Crown. This barrister—an eminent man in his profession—set forth all the circumstances of the crime, detailing the supposed movements of the prisoner on the night of the murder, and ended with an allusion to the witnesses he proposed to call in order to prove his guilt. Then one by one those who had appeared at the inquest, including Lovel and Iris, gave their evidence, which, as may be guessed, incriminated Lester in a very decided fashion. To the majority of the spectators, ignorant of what had been discovered since the inquest, it seemed probable that Lester was guilty, that he would be convicted, sentenced, and ultimately hanged.

Thinking thus, those present in the court were astonished to see how serene was the demeanour of the prisoner. Dr. Lester, dressed in mourning for his child—a fact which the female portion of the audience resented as hypocrisy—stood quite composed in the dock, and paid the greatest attention to the accusa-

tions which were leveled against him. Only once did he wince, and that was when allusion was made to his drunken habits and frequent states of dangerous frenzy induced by intoxication. Otherwise he was unmoved.

"You say this one not wicked!" whispered Catinka to Lovel, who had returned to his seat after giving his evidence. "I think they all say he kill that poor daughter."

"Wait till you hear both sides of the question," replied Lovel, in the same low tones; "the doctor has yet to make his defence."

Counsel for the accused made a very short speech. He stated that the prisoner had been drunk on the night and at the time of the murder; that he had taken a loaded pistol, and had gone out in search of Mr. Lovel at half-past eight o'clock. After leaving the house, he recollected no more until he returned home at dawn; and the Crown relied on this state of forgetfulness, caused by intoxication, to prove the prisoner's guilt. Under the circumstances it indeed was hard to tell if the prisoner had not shot the deceased in mistake for Mr. Lovel; but fortunately, in the interests of justice, he, the counsel for the accused, could produce, and intended to produce, a lady of well-known veracity, who could prove that the man in the dock was entirely innocent, and had not committed the crime alleged against him. Counsel stated also that he had only one witness, a lady, and that lady Miss Clyde, but that she would be able to refute all the evidence brought against the prisoner by the prosecution. As the jury now understood what he pro-



posed to do, he, counsel for the defense, would call Selina Clyde.

Miss Clyde at once stepped into the witness-box, and was duly sworn. She gave in detail the evidence of her taking the pistol off Lester, and related almost in the same words the story which she had told to Mexton. Counsel for the Crown cross-examined her severely, but nothing could shake her testimony; and when she left the witness-box the tide had turned in favour of Lester, and all present believed him to be guiltless. The summing up of the judge inclined towards this view; and the jury, without leaving the box—so great was the impression produced by Miss Clyde's evidence—pronounced the prisoner innocent. A verdict of not guilty was given; the judge discharged the doctor, and Lester stepped down from the box a free man, amid the applause of the court.

"So he did not kill after all?" said Catinka, who looked rather disappointed with the verdict.

"No," replied Lovel coldly. "You have heard the evidence; Lester is innocent."

"And who is guilty?"

"I don't know."

Catinka laughed in a scoffing manner. "I thought you would have known by this time," she observed with a shrug.

"Do you know?" demanded Lovel sharply.

"I do. I was told by the man himself."

"The man himself! Who is he?"

"Wait; you will hear in a few minutes."

"In this court?"

"Yes. See!" Catinka stretched out her arm. "Mr.

Herne knows who killed the poor lady; see, my dear, he rises to tell the name."

And indeed Herne, in spite of an attempt on the part of Chaskin to prevent him, was on his feet, demanding permission to speak. Before the judge could retire, before the lawyers could rise from the table, before the jury could leave the box, or a single person the court, Herne, without waiting for the permission he had asked for, was making a speech. His face was flushed with excitement, his eyes flashed, and he spoke rapidly, clearly, and to the point. His words solved the problem of Milly's death, and they were few.

"My lord," he cried, "and you, gentlemen of the jury, you have liberated one man as guiltless of the death of my promised wife; now I require you to order the arrest of another man—of the man who came by stealth and killed her, to save her soul from ill. You wish to know who killed Millicent Lester. Here is the man!" Herne struck himself on the breast. "I killed her! I saved her soul! I—I—I!"

## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE TRUTH AT LAST.

AFTER this extraordinary outbreak of Herne's, in which he accused himself of Milly's murder, Chaskin led him away, and the court was adjourned till next day. The situation of a man accusing himself thus was so utterly without precedent that the presiding judge did not know how to act. Without sifting the matter and finding why Herne accused himself so publicly, he did not want to take upon himself the responsibility of ordering his arrest. Moreover, the judge, who knew somewhat of Herne's eccentricities, was privately of the opinion that the man was not quite right in his mind. The tragic death of his future wife had evidently disturbed the balance of his brain, and had led him in a frenzy of horror and self-humiliation to accuse himself publicly of a crime he had not committed. On these grounds, reasonable enough, Herne was permitted to go free, until the truth of his extraordinary confession could be proved.

Nevertheless, the judge, while thus cautious and lenient, intimated that it was his opinion that the police should personally see after Herne. If he were guilty, he should be arrested forthwith; if insane, he was not

fit to be at large. Acting upon this advice, Inspector Drek followed Herne and Chaskin to their hotel, and requested an interview. In response to his inquiry the Vicar presented himself.

"You cannot see Mr. Herne at present," he said gravely; "he is much excited; but I have persuaded him to lie down. Is it your intention to arrest him, Mr. Drek?"

"If I see reason to adopt so extreme a course," replied Drek. "What is your opinion of this confession, sir?"

"I don't believe one word of it."

"You think, then, that Mr. Herne is innocent?"

"Most decidedly," returned Chaskin. "He is as guiltless as I am."

"Is that a good example?" said Drek with some dryness. "You know that Mrs. Jimboy accuses you as the author of the crime, on the evidence of the pistol."

"I do not wonder at her belief," answered Chaskin quietly; "the pistol is mine; it has my name on the butt, and it was found on the spot where the poor girl's body was discovered by me. Men have been hanged on less evidence, Mr. Drek."

"No doubt; but they have made some attempt to defend themselves," retorted the inspector. "You, sir, as I understand from Messrs. Lovel and Mexton, decline to say if you are innocent or guilty."

"I did decline," was the Vicar's reply, "for the sake of my poor friend; but——"

"Ah!" cried Drek, sharply, "then you were afraid

lest he should be arrested; you refused to speak, so as to screen him?"

"I did," said Chaskin simply. "You must remember, sir, that Mr. Herne is my dearest friend, and I would do much to save him from the consequences of his own folly."

"What folly? The public confession?"

"Yes—a public confession which is false?"

"If it is false, why should Mr. Herne make it? A man does not put his neck in danger for nothing."

"Are you so sure of that, Mr. Drek? I have heard of many men giving themselves up for crimes of which they were guiltless."

"Uneducated men."

"Yes, and men of education also. I tell you, Mr. Drek, that my friend did not fire that shot."

"Then who did? Yourself?"

"No; I am innocent, as I can say now freely. I refused to speak because I thought that my speaking might get Herne into trouble. Now that he has made a public statement—not a confession, mind you—accusing himself of a crime which he did not commit, I think it my duty to tell you what I know. Sit down, please, Mr. Drek, and listen to what I have to say."

Drek did so, in some perplexity, for he did not know what the Vicar could tell him likely to nullify Herne's statement. Only a knowledge of the name of the real assassin could prove Herne's innocence, and the Vicar confessed that he was ignorant of such name. However, the case had become so complicated that Drek was thankful for any story, or confession, or statement, or declaration likely to throw light on its dark-

ness. Therefore he forebore to speak, and with his keen eyes fixed upon Chaskin, he waited patiently to hear what the Vicar had to say. At the present moment Drek's mind was in a state of confusion.

"When Messrs. Mexton and Lovel came to see me last week," explained Chaskin, "I had just parted from my friend. He had lately returned from London, where he had seen a lady called Catinka Poluski."

"I know," said Drek, with a nod; "the violinist. Mexton told me about her."

"Well, it appears that she was in the lane on the night of the murder."

"I know that also, Mr. Chaskin. She saw the corpse, and to inculcate Mr. Herne, so as to get a hold on him for his money, she left a rainbow feather on the spot. Herne knew by that of her presence, and went up to see her. Well, sir, and what did she say?"

"She stated that she saw Herne watching Miss Lester and Lovel; also that he fired a pistol and killed the girl; then he fled."

"Do you believe that, Mr. Chaskin?"

"No," replied the Vicar decidedly, "because when Herne saw the pair he was thrown into such a state of emotion that he fell into a trance. When he recovered the girl was dead, and the pistol was gone."

"Lovel told me about the trance," said Drek thoughtfully. "But about this pistol. It is yours, I believe?"

"Yes. And on that assumption Mr. Lovel accused me of the crime. I said nothing in order to screen my friend; but I can tell you now, Mr. Drek. Herne

took that pistol out of the case in my study three months ago."

"For what reason?"

"Well, you know Herne is philanthropic, and has many acquaintances amid humble people; also amid Socialistic societies. One of these societies asked him for money, which he refused to give, as he did not approve of the purposes for which the society had been founded. In a rage—for the members had revealed their secrets to Herne—they threatened to kill him. He told me of this, and laughed at their threats; but I, knowing the class of reckless men he had to deal with, advised him to go armed. I gave him that pistol myself."

"And he had it with him on the night of the murder?"

"Yes, Mr. Drek," added the Vicar after a pause. "I do not mind telling you that the mind of my friend is not properly balanced. He had an idea that Milly Lester was lost if she did not marry him; and hearing of her entanglement with Lovel, he came down here with the firm intention of killing them both. This he confessed to me; he wished to save Miss Lester's soul at the expense of her body, and kill Lovel for tempting her away from him. With the pistol he went to the Winding Lane to kill the pair, and he would have done so but for his trance."

"H'm! you are rather a Devil's Advocate, Mr. Chaskin!" said Drek, doubtfully; "your testimony, so far as I can see, is rather calculated to harm your friend than to do him good."

"I must tell the truth at all costs," said Chaskin

sadly; "my only hope of saving my poor, foolish friend is to be honest and outspoken. Catinka lies, because she wishes to terrorise Herne into giving her money. But she does not know his nature. As soon as he heard from her that he had fired the pistol, he resolved to denounce himself before the court at the trial of Dr. Lester. Catinka came down to see if he would carry out his intention, for I saw her in the court, standing by Lucas Lovel. Well, he accused himself, as you know, but he is guiltless, I am certain."

"But if he went there to kill the girl, and took the pistol to commit the crime, he must have carried out his intention."

"No, he intended to do so, but God mercifully stayed his hand. He fell into a trance, and when in such a condition he can do nothing. I believe that the assassin saw him stiff and rigid in his trance, and took the revolver out of his hand to kill the girl. The deed done, the assassin fled, and Herne came out of his cataleptic state to find the dead body of the girl. At first he thought Lovel had acted thus; but when Catinka told him that she had seen him fire the pistol himself he withdrew his accusation."

"H'm! it might be as you say, sir, but——"

"Chaskin! Frank! where are you?"

"There is Herne!" said the Vicar rising rapidly. "In his present state of mind he must not see you. I'll keep him in the bedroom."

He walked rapidly towards the door of the inner room; but before he could enter it was flung violently open, and Herne, in a terrible state of excitement, threw himself into the arms of his friend.



"Frank! Frank!" he gasped, "I have been dreaming; the devils came in my dream to drag me down for the sin on my soul. I killed Milly, and they want my soul!"

"My dear Darcy, you did not kill Milly," said Chaskin, soothing the distraught man as he would a child. "You are innocent."

"No, no; I am guilty! guilty! There is blood on my hands! Yet I killed her to save her soul. God knows I wanted to save her from sin. I—I—ah! what!"—his gaze suddenly fell on Drek—"are you there, bloodhound of the law? Do you come to take me to gaol? Do so, do so; I fear no punishment of man, for God has laid the burden of Cain upon me."

"I have not come to arrest you, Mr. Herne," said Drek, pitying the nervous agitation of the man. "I believe you to be innocent."

"Then you believe wrongly," retorted Herne, recovering himself a trifle. "I came down on that night from London in disguise to kill Lovel and Milly—to punish the first and save the second. I took Chaskin's pistol with me—he will tell you so—and I shot my poor darling."

"You did nothing of the sort!" insisted Chaskin. "Before you could raise the pistol you fell into one of your trances. God forgive you, my poor friend, for on that night I know that murder was in your heart. Still, in His mercy He took away your power of action, and you did not commit the crime."

"Catinka says that I did."

"Blackmail!" said Drek contemptuously. "She thought you would be frightened into parting with

money to her society; but by a public confession you have taken the game out of her hands. Don't you believe that young woman, Mr. Herne; she's a liar."

"I can't believe it!" exclaimed the unhappy man, clasping his hands. "When I fell into my trance, Milly was alive; when I came out of it she was dead. Also, you found my handkerchief stained with blood; I dropped that while bending over her. I was there on the spot——"

"And the pistol was gone!" said Chaskin—"don't forget that."

"So I say," cried Herne; "and I say also that I was in a trance. But how do you know that I am not lying?"

"For the very good reason that Lovel saw you in the trance," said Drek.

"Did he see me fire the shot?"

"No; he saw no one fire the shot, but he heard it. When the girl fell dead he rushed round to see who was the assassin, but the dastard had fled. Then, afraid lest he should be arrested for the murder, he went away to Gran Jimboy's tent, and persuaded her to swear that he had been there all the evening."

"Did he leave me still in the trance?"

"Yes; you were as still as stone. When did you wake up?"

Herne passed his hand over his forehead. "I don't know," he said in a faltering voice. "When I came to myself I found Milly's dead body; and then, recognising my own danger, I fled also, and got my horse. I rode back to Marborough, and returned to London;

but I swear that I did not think I killed the girl, else I would have given myself up. I did not know until Catinka told me of my sin."

"She told a lie, Mr. Herne," said Drek with a nod. "I told you her reason before: blackmail."

The squire, still convinced of his guilt, was about to begin his protestations anew, when the door opened and Paul Mexton, breathless with haste, rushed in, waving a paper.

"Chaskin, Herne! I beg your pardon," he cried, "but I was told at the police office that Drek was here, and I couldn't wait there to see him. I had to come on at once."

"What is the matter?" asked the inspector, rising.

"Mother Jimboy is dead!"

"Dead!" echoed Chaskin, starting. "And her confession?"

"Here it is, written down by me, signed by her, and attested with due legality by two witnesses of full age and intelligence."

"Does she say who killed Miss Lester?" asked Drek, with a glance at Chaskin.

"Yes, the name of the guilty person is here. Who do you think killed poor Milly?"

"I did—I did!" cried Herne, beating his breast.

"You!" cried Paul, astonished. "Nothing of the sort! The wretch who killed Milly was none other than Mother Jimboy herself."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL."

THE three men were amazed at this statement, so different from what they expected, and looked at Paul with incredulity. Herne was the first to recover his presence of mind, and, carried away by his feelings, fell on his knees with clasped hands in a frenzy of relief and gratitude.

"O God!" he cried with a broken voice, "I thank Thee that Thou hast removed this doubt from my mind, this sin from my soul. I am innocent of this crime."

"I knew you were," said Chaskin, laying a kind hand on his friend's shoulder. "Did I not tell you so?" Rise, Darcy, and let us hear the particulars. No doubt Mr. Mexton can tell us how the crime was committed."

"Certainly," said Paul, who had thrown himself into a chair. "But I have no breath left to tell you the details. They are all in the confession which Drek holds in his hand."

"Read the confesion, Mr. Drek," said the Vicar.

The inspector, who was rapidly glancing over the paper, nodded in an absent manner, being taken up

with what he was reading. His face expressed amazement, and when he came to the end of the confession he looked round at the assembled company with an uneasy smile. Evidently he had fallen several degrees in his own estimation.

"She did it, sure enough;" he said, in a crestfallen manner; "but who would have suspected that harmless old woman? I put the blame on to everyone but her; and she must have chuckled at the mistakes I made. Well, well; even detectives are mortal, and liable to err; it is only in novels that they never go wrong. But then," added Drek, with sarcasm, "the detective of a novel knows as much as the author who writes about him."

"What was the motive for the crime?" asked Herne, abruptly; he was not interested in the inspector's feelings.

"Love of her grandson."

"Her grandson!" echoed Chaskin. "I did not know she had one!"

"Yes; Lucas Lovel is her grandson."

"Ah!" said Herne, thoughtfully; "I am not surprised. Lovel told me that he was half a gipsy; but I did not know he was so near of kin to Mother Jimboy. Why did he not admit the relationship?"

"He did—to me," said Paul, "but he did not think it necessary to make the announcement public. I don't blame him. Gran Jimboy was hardly a relative to be proud of."

"I wonder if Lovel knew that his grandmother was guilty," said Chaskin, doubtfully.

"No, sir; had he thought so he would not have ac-

cused you," cried Drek, with energy. "Besides," he continued, tapping the paper, "in this confession she declares that she told no one."

"Let me hear the details," said Herne; and this request being echoed by Chaskin—for Paul, of course, was already acquainted with the contents of the document—Drek read out the confession of Mrs. Jimboy. The statement ran as follows:

"My name is Nance Jimboy, but I was born a Lovel. My son was a musician, and, tired of gipsy life, he went among the Gentiles, with whom he became famous. He married a Gorgio woman against my wish, and cut himself off from the gentle Romany. His rani died in giving birth to a son—Lucas Lovel—for his father took my maiden name when he turned to the Gentiles. Then my son perished, and the boy was brought up by a maiden aunt. I knew all about his life, and watched his progress, as he was my only grandson. He became a painter, and wandered abroad for many years. When he returned he came down to Barnstead, and fell in love with the beautiful girl who was to marry Squire Herne. I say she was beautiful, but she had a bad heart, and would have ruined my grandson. For Squire Herne I cared nothing, but I thought a great deal of Lucas: bone of my bone he is, and flesh of my flesh. I heard of his return, of his living in Barnstead, and of his love for that wicked witch. I came to watch over him; and at first I tried to part him from Miss Lester by writing to Squire Herne of her stolen meetings with my grandson. I thought that in his rage he might kill her, and so she would be removed from the path of Lucas."

"The wicked woman!" cried Chaskin, aghast at this cool and cynical statement.

"It is true, it is true!" groaned Herne, remorsefully. "I would have killed her on that night, but that the Lord stayed my hand. That gipsy knew me better than I did myself."

"Did you know that she wrote the letters?" asked Paul.

"I did; they were not signed, but for certain reasons, which I need not explain, I fancied that Mrs. Jim-boy was my correspondent. I taxed her with the writing of them, and she admitted the fact. But I daresay she tells all this in her confession."

"No," replied Paul, shaking his head. "However, she tells a good deal. Go on, Drek."

"My object in getting rid of Miss Lester," said Drek, reading from the document, "was to let Lucas make a good marriage. I knew that he was loved by Miss Clyde, of Clyde's Farm, a rich lady who was devoted to him. Lucas is not clever enough to make money for himself, and as he had very little I wanted him to place himself beyond the reach of poverty by wedding with Miss Clyde. I urged him to do so; but, not knowing that I was his grandmother, he refused to speak with me on the subject. He continued to meet Miss Lester, until, by pretending to read her hand, I gave her a friendly warning of what she might expect if she continued her evil ways with Lucas."

"That was the prophecy on the day before the murder," said Paul grimly. "I knew all Mother Jim-boy's palmistry was humbug."

"Miss Lester laughed at my warning; so when she

left Lucas I saw him again, and revealed our relationship; also I urged him for his own sake to give up his foolish fancy for the doctor's daughter and marry Miss Clyde. He was much astonished to learn that he was my grandson, but refused to leave Miss Lester or to marry the other lady. Also, he told me that he had fancied, from certain words let fall by his aunt—a foolish woman—that he was partly a gipsy, and had said as much to a lady called Catinka, who in her turn told Squire Herne. Well, I could not induce Lucas to give over his folly, but when he told me that he intended to meet Miss Lester in the Winding Lane on the next night, I wrote to Squire Herne in London and warned him of the meeting."

"How did she know your address, Herne?" asked Chaskin.

"I told it to her, so that she might advise me of Milly's behaviour with Lovel."

"That was unworthy of you," said the Vicar coldly; "no English gentleman should condescend to employ a spy."

"I know, I know!" cried Herne with an ashamed look; "but let it pass. Go on, Drek."

The inspector continued to read: "The next evening, after eight o'clock, I went to the Winding Lane to see what would occur. I did not know if Squire Herne would come down in answer to my letter, but I knew that if he did he would certainly kill the girl. I had heard his determination to do so."

"I wished to save her soul," groaned the Squire; "now I see that I was wrong."

"In the Winding Lane, close by the stile," read



Drek rapidly, "I saw Miss Lester and Lucas talking together. I was hidden in the bushes near them. Shortly afterwards Squire Herne, wrapped in a heavy cloak, stole through the wood. I saw him pause a short distance away from me. I could have almost touched him. He had a pistol in his hand. I thought he was going to shoot the girl, and I was glad——"

"Horrible! horrible!" cried Chaskin, with a pale face.

"I was glad because I wished her out of the way, so that Lucas could marry Miss Clyde. But Squire Herne did not shoot, although, as I thought, he had stood up to do so. I crept near him, and found that he was in a trance, and quite incapable of motion. I suppose rage at the sight of Lucas and Miss Lester threw him into the trance. The pistol had fallen from his hand and lay on the grass. I seized it, for I was angered to think that my plot to rid myself of the girl by the hand of Squire Herne should fail. I waited for a moment, and then raised the pistol and fired. Miss Lester fell with a cry, and I saw Lucas bending over her. Then I put the pistol in my pocket, and crept away as quickly as I could. When I got to the borders of the wood I ran across the common and back to my tent. I thought that I was safe, as the blame would be laid on Squire Herne. Also, that he might think himself that he had killed the girl while in his trance."

"As I did," said Herne with a sigh.

"Shortly afterwards Lucas came to my tent, and I promised to save him by swearing to a lie at the inquest. I did so; but I did not tell him that I had killed the girl. Afterwards, when I heard that he was likely

to be accused, I told Mr. Mexton that the Vicar had killed Miss Lester. When I saw Mr. Chaskin it was before the murder was committed, and he was going away from the Winding Lane. I accused him only to save Lucas, and because his name was on the pistol."

"I have had a fortunate escape," said Chaskin, thankfully. "What a wicked old woman."

Drek finished the manuscript. "I would not have confessed the truth now," were Mrs. Jimboy's final words, "but I am dying. It will do me no good to hurt Mr. Chaskin, and I can save Lucas as well by confessing myself the criminal. I killed Miss Lester, and everybody else accused of the crime is innocent. I am dying, and I ask everybody's pardon. I am a wicked woman, and I did a wicked deed, but it was to benefit my grandson. Let Lucas marry Miss Clyde, so that I shall not have sinned for nothing. I ask no more."

This document was signed in a shaky manner by the old gipsy, and was witnessed by Paul Mexton and another man. It exonerated all persons from the chance of being accused, and revealed plainly the name of the assassin—Mother Jimboy—and the reason for the assassination—her love for Lucas Lovel.

"Well," said Paul, when Drek had finished reading the confession, and had put it in his pocket to carry it to the proper quarter, "the mystery is solved at last; Milly's murderer is known, and has escaped the reward of her evil deed."

"She has gone before the court of God," said Chaskin solemnly.

"May He have mercy on her sin," sighed Herne;

after which there was nothing more to be said, and the four men parted—the Squire and Chaskin to Barnstead, and Paul, with Drek, to lay the confession of Mother Jimboy, deceased, before the magistrates.

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And here, with the discovery of Milly's assassin, the main interest of the tale, such as it is, comes to an end. But those who have been interested in this drama of a provincial town may desire to know how the other characters fared when the culminating point of the tragedy with which they were concerned was reached. The play is played out, the actors leave the stage; and now remains the question: What became of them?

Well, Paul Mexton ended in marrying Iris Link, and in becoming the sub-editor of the "Tory Times." He still lives at Marborough, and has not yet realised his desire to dwell in London; but that ambition may be accomplished when he writes his great book. Iris, who is devoted to her husband, and is happier than ever she was in her life, believes in the book; also that Paul will become a celebrated author. At present, however, Paul's ambition is bounded by the hope that he may become the editor of his paper. And as these two are content and happy in their own small way, we may leave them.

Miss Clyde, as may be guessed, married Lucas, for she pursued him with such vigor that she absolutely forced him to become her husband. He is happier than he deserves to be, for both Mrs. Lovel and Mrs. Drass adore him, and he leads a fairly contented life; all the same, he often grows tired of such sober bliss,

and wishes to break away. As yet he has not succeeded, as his wife keeps too close a watch on him. Lucas has not escaped punishment for his follies, for his life of tranquility bores him to distraction.

Dr. Lester never touched drink again—that is, strong drink—for the lesson taught to him by Miss Clyde was severe, but efficacious. He is getting together a good practice, and on the whole, is quite a reformed character. Francis Chaskin is still the Vicar of Barnstead, and is still adored by his parishioners—particularly the female portion. So much for doctor and clergyman.

As to Herne, he laid flowers on Milly's grave for two months, then ceased to visit the cemetery at all, and went up to London. There he met again with Catinka, and, unmindful of her treachery, he suffered himself to be beguiled. She now uses his money to further her plots against the Czar and to free Poland. Chaskin cannot persuade Herne to leave her; so, what with funds, and ambitions, and reckless members, there may be trouble expected from the Society of the Rainbow Feather.

**THE END.**







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